

NBA

PREVIEW

THE ROCKETS' AUDACIOUS PLAN TO WIN A CHAMPIONSHIP

STARRING

THE BEARD & CP3

BY JACKIE MACMULLAN





LEBRON JAMES



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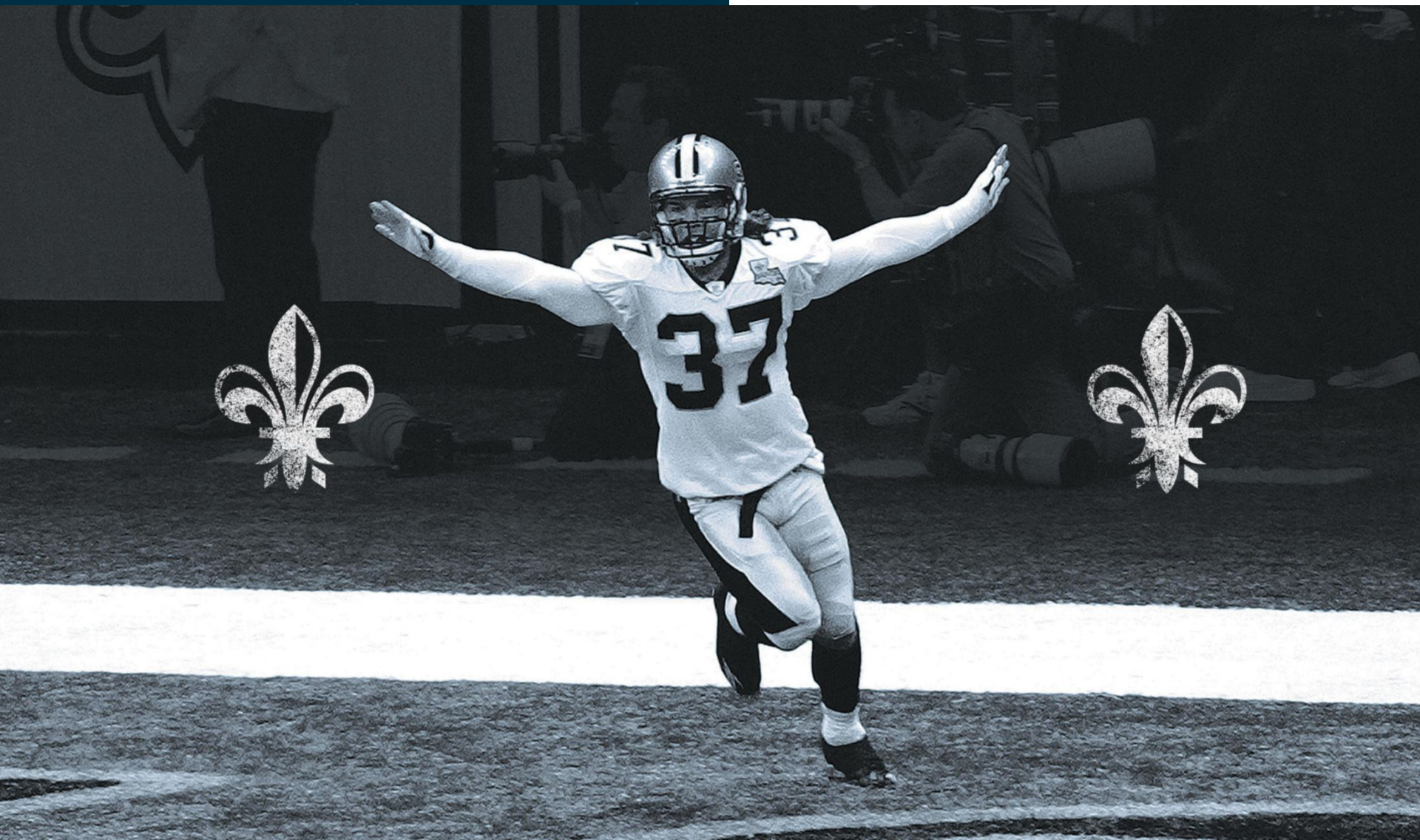
Thirteen months after Katrina, the Saints returned to the Dome on a Monday Night. On the fifth play of the game, special teams player Steve Gleason flew up the middle and blocked Atlanta's punt as millions screamed, cried, and danced. The moment became a symbol of the city's rebirth and Gleason's

subsequent battle with ALS has come to represent the city's "No White Flags" mentality. A statue now commemorates the play outside the Dome.

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the most notable being the PT boats, as well as the landing craft which allowed troops to storm over an open beach. President Eisenhower declared Andrew Higgins "the man who won the war for us." Today, the National WWII Museum stands in New Orleans as a testament to this accomplishment.

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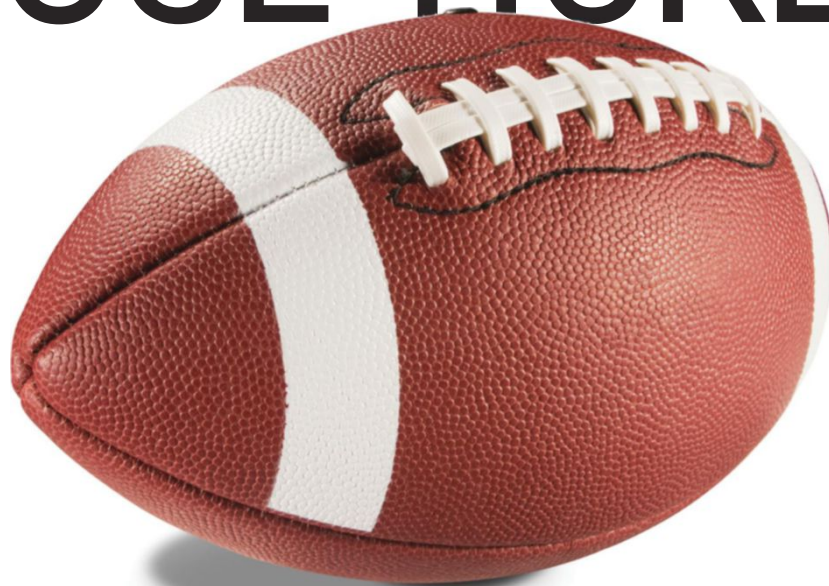


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Without running mate CP3, Blake Griffin looks to keep the Clippers above water.

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Can you see, they're protesting injustice, not the anthem.

BY HOWARD BRYANT



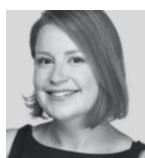
We Have Liftoff ...

Senior writer Jackie MacMullan on the elevation of James Harden:

During my reporting on the new-look Rockets, the word people used to describe Harden, aka the Beard, was “stubborn.” I had seen no evidence of this during my visit, so I asked the development coach, Irving Roland, to enlighten me. He harked back to an August workout in Miami when he wanted Harden to concentrate on taking floaters off two feet. “Waste of time,” Harden grouched. “I take most of my floaters exploding off one foot.” The next morning, Roland reconvened with Harden armed with video clips of every one of Harden’s floaters from last season. There were 132 of them, and 77 were off two feet. “All right,” Harden said, grinning. “Let’s get to work.” MORE ON PAGE 52

New teammates Chris Paul and James Harden pose on a rooftop in Houston.

NHL writer Emily Kaplan on the transcendence of Auston Matthews



In July, I had lunch in LA with a friend in sports media. When talk turned to hockey, I mentioned Auston Matthews. Now, even though my friend is admittedly not a hockey fan, I was still

shocked when she said, “Who?” *Only the NHL’s best American-born rookie, that’s who!* Matthews, the Maple Leafs’ California native now in his second season, is insanely talented and incredibly marketable—yet something is preventing him from celebrity status, especially at home. I wonder how much longer it will take for him to become a household name. MORE ON PAGE 13

Senior writer David Fleming on the unforgettable fire of smelling salts



As I reported on elite athletes huffing smelling salts, everyone I talked to had the same response: *If you really want to understand, you have to try them yourself.*

I was expecting the kind of refreshing menthol blast you see in chewing gum commercials, the kind that would send me back to my keyboard in an energized state of euphoria. Instead, I was hit with a Porta-John punch of raw chemical stench so strong and sharp it made my eyes water and my stomach turn while reminding me to never underestimate the bizarre things athletes will do for an edge. MORE ON PAGE 26

Senior writer Sam Alipour on paddleboarding with the Clippers



While in the water off Waikiki Beach during a training camp break, Blake Griffin and I were met by several surprise guests, including a gorgeous sea turtle, a peculiar sea lion and a bunch

of curious Clippers. When DeAndre Jordan flipped Blake off his board, the *SportsCenter* camera that had been affixed to the board was jarred loose, sinking it—along with our footage. “I’m sorry, guys,” DJ said. He quickly formed an all-Clippers rescue squad, and minutes later he resurfaced with the camera above his head. We mobbed him like he’d hit a game winner. MORE ON PAGE 62

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The Best Franchise in Sports When it comes to making fans happy, no team delivers more bang for the buck than the Nashville Predators.



oot for the Nashville Predators and you get the feeling of trashing your archrival's car.

That's no metaphor. Before every home playoff game in Nashville, a local artist named Audie Adams paints a vehicle in the colors and logo of the Preds' opponent, and for a small donation to the club's charitable foundation, fans can step up with a sledgehammer and bash the thing to pieces.

This goofy ritual is a timely reminder that sports at their best let us hate without being hateful. And it's a small but fun example of why the Predators deliver more value to their fans than any other team in North America.

If we were still running ESPN's Ultimate Standings—which compiled fan surveys and financial analysis to determine which franchises give back the most to fans—there's no question who would rank No. 1 this year. Nashville made the Stanley Cup finals while charging middle-of-the-pack ticket prices. Beyond that bang for the buck, the Preds deliver eye-popping customer service. In our most recent polls, Nashville topped all NHL clubs in engaging fans through social media, delivering information via mobile devices, making it easy to use the team website and providing avenues for feedback.

Buy a Predators ticket and you'll receive an email telling you about promotions at your game and who's singing at intermissions. Send questions back about parking or food allergies and you'll get a personal reply. "We are in a dialogue with every fan who comes through our gates," says CEO Sean Henry, who has been figuring out how to take care of crowds since he started his career as a busboy at Robert Moses State Park on Long Island, New York.

Nashville was one of the NHL's wobbly forays into the Sun Belt under Gary Bettman, and a decade ago the franchise was in serious trouble. Bleeding cash, the Predators were so close to moving to Hamilton, Ontario, that season-ticket deposits were being made there. And even after fans rallied to keep the team in Music City, prompting civic leaders and local sponsors to help, it turned out that part-owner William "Boots" Del Biaggio had used fraudulent loans to buy his share of the club. (He wound up bankrupt and spent time in prison.)

Things began to turn around in 2010, when former health care executive Thomas Cigarran took over as chairman. Under Cigarran, Henry and chief revenue officer Chris Junghans, the Predators have balanced the demands of existing fans with the need to keep cultivating new

followers in a nontraditional hockey market. This season Nashville says its season-ticket sales are up more than 30 percent, but the team still reserves about 3,000 tickets per game for individual or group sales. Management has also empowered David Poile, the NHL's reigning GM of the year. Before last season, Poile traded Shea Weber for younger, cheaper and just-as-great P.K. Subban. This summer he signed or re-signed Ryan Johansen, Viktor Arvidsson, Nick Bonino and Austin Watson—all to contracts of different lengths, layering potential defections the Preds will face in the future.

Add it all up and the Predators, who are growing a new generation of fans two decades after their launch, are a team on the cusp. And they are worthy successors to franchises that have excelled in our rankings, such as the Spurs, Packers and Lightning. These teams offer two big lessons. First, sports look very different to fans paying for their seats than to most sports writers or team executives. Time and again, fans have told us they care more about players giving their best effort, owners providing friendly arenas and teams showing loyalty (to their rosters as well as their communities) than championships. Fans want commitment, not guarantees.

Further, fan value is franchise value. Big league clubs are protected monopolies with huge media deals, so even the Cleveland Browns are worth nearly \$2 billion, according to *Forbes*. But for a team to *maximize* its value, it needs connections to local sponsors and community leaders and die-hard followers who won't bail when it falters on the field or court or ice. Which is why investing in fans is a better long-term strategy than screwing them.

Since the 2012-13 lockout, *Forbes* says the Predators' value has jumped by 62 percent to \$270 million. As more fans grow up learning to throw catfish onto the Nashville ice, it's a good bet those numbers have just started to take off.

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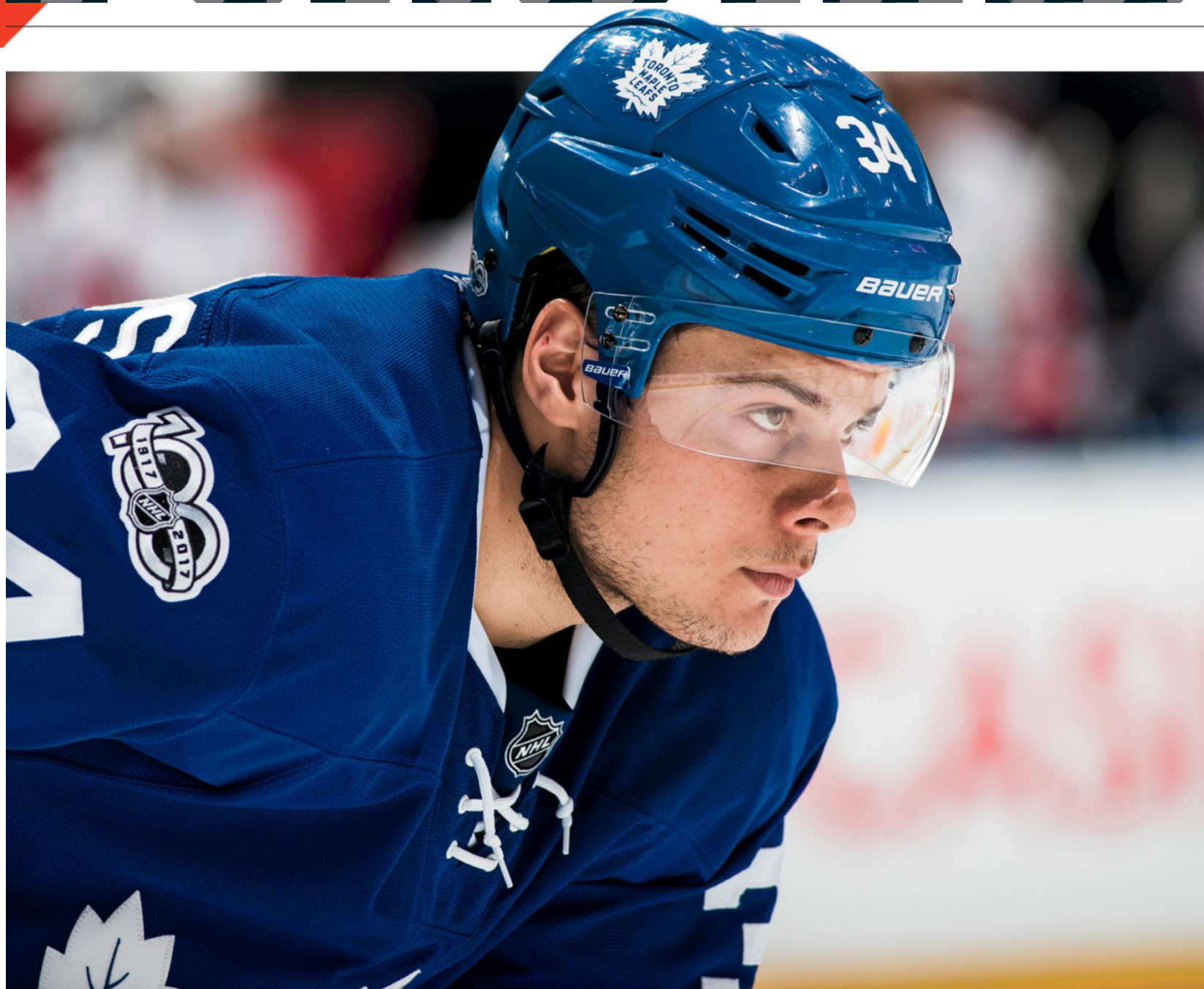
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FORWARD



Almost Famous

With once-in-a-generation talent and a uniquely American backstory, why isn't Maple Leafs phenom Auston Matthews a bigger star?

BY EMILY KAPLAN



When Auston Matthews made his debut for the Toronto Maple Leafs last fall, perched in the 300-level nosebleeds of Ottawa's Canadian Tire Centre was Samuel Siboko, a 20-year-old rapper and quasi-hockey fan. Siboko barely knew anything about Matthews; he was there with a friend because they scored cheap tickets. Four hours later, Siboko walked into the crisp autumn night entranced. He didn't know what he had seen, just that it was special. The 19-year-old Matthews scored a

whopping four goals, and Siboko couldn't stop thinking about it. Weeks later, Siboko was in the recording studio that doubles as his living room, listening to a new beat from a friend. He loved it but couldn't match lyrics to its low, lurching chorus. He let his mind drift, but it kept returning to hockey's newest sensation.

"Everyone just kept saying his name," says Siboko, who goes by the stage name SVDVM. "So I was like, 'Let me put it to a beat.'" SVDVM's "Auston Matthews"—with the inspired hook: "Auston Mat-

thews ... Auston Matthews ... hit 'em with the four like Auston Matthews"—had a strong run on Spotify playlists and clubs in The Six last winter.

Songs often take inspiration from folk heroes—rarely rookies. But Matthews' first season was nothing short of historic. With 40 goals and 69 points, the center posted the best freshman season in the Leafs' 100-year existence. He easily clinched rookie of the year, taking home the Calder Trophy as the Leafs leaped from last place in 2015-16 to the playoffs. He has the league's fourth-best-selling jersey.

"Any hockey player in this city gets a lot of attention," says Leafs defenseman Morgan Rielly. "But it's a little different for Auston."

After the season, Matthews returned to his hometown of Scottsdale, Arizona, and crashed with his parents, looking for all the comforts of family, including his mom's famous tortilla soup. It didn't take long to realize that his safe harbor extended past his parents' front lawn. He started Pilates classes at a local studio, but his name didn't register with the instructor. He went to the mall, and after a lap around the concourse, he noticed: Nobody was watching him. Matthews called a restaurant, gave his full name and marveled when the hostess simply said OK. "You know," Matthews says, "what normal people do." In July, Matthews visited Southern California, where Frederick Andersen, the Leafs' starting goaltender, makes his offseason home. They sat for hours on the waterfront deck of a Laguna Beach restaurant, and only one person approached them.

Pretend for a second we're talking about Aaron

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South Carolina State vs. Southern University
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LAS VEGAS, NV - SAM BOYD STADIUM
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C-USA vs. Mountain West
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BOCA RATON, FL - FAU STADIUM
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www.BahamasBowl.com



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BOISE, ID - ALBERTSONS STADIUM
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MAC vs. Mountain West
www.FamousIdahoPotatoBowl.com



BIRMINGHAM BOWL

BIRMINGHAM, AL - LEGION FIELD
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SEC vs. American Athletic
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Western Michigan
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Gonzaga - Michigan State - North Carolina
Ohio State - Oklahoma - Oregon - Portland
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New Mexico State - Princeton - USC
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Judge, whose bat and towering presence have already made the rookie the new face of the Yankees, if not baseball. Would any of this anonymity make sense? Yet such is the reality for Matthews, arguably one of the most captivating hockey talents in a generation. “In America,” Matthews says, “if I’m not at an ice rink, nobody knows who I am.”

This is a problem, and not just for Matthews.

TORONTO HASN’T WON a Stanley Cup since 1967, and season after season of rebuilds have left Leafs fans wearing paper bags over their heads, even tossing jerseys onto the ice during games. In 2016, Toronto used the No. 1 pick of the draft to select a 6-foot-3, 216-pound kid from Arizona whose mom just happens to be from Mexico: Auston Matthews.

His first goal in his debut against the Senators came 8 minutes and 21 seconds in. Matthews pounced on a loose puck in the slot, swiping it past Senators goalie Craig Anderson. Cameras located his parents, Brian and Ema, in the stands as they kissed, hugged and pumped their fists (in that order). Less than six minutes later, Matthews knocked the puck out of the air, poked it through the legs of Mike Hoffman, then scooted around Ottawa’s über-skilled captain, Erik Karlsson, on the boards. Marc Methot flailed on his stomach across the ice as a last-ditch attempt; no match for the 19-year-old’s short-side shot. He made Ottawa look silly, getting the puck into the back of the net two more times, and by the end, Ema was sobbing. Her son had made history, becoming the first player to score four goals in his debut. Virtually every NHL player with a Twitter account chimed in. “Since the start of this game I didn’t even have a chance to drink 4beers,” Kings winger Marian Gaborik wrote. “And he’s got 4goals.” Panthers goalie Roberto Luongo declared that his backup would play all games against Toronto. Penguins defenseman Kris Letang invited Matthews to his beer league—no matter the kid was two years away from legally drinking in his home country.

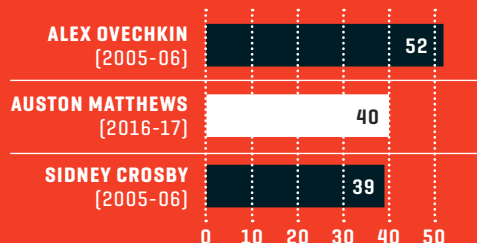
After finishing 40–27–15—Toronto’s winningest season in a decade—Matthews had created outsized expectations. A parade down Yonge Street no longer sounded like a punchline to fans.

“He is exactly what the Leafs needed,” says Wendel Clark, a former Toronto captain also selected No. 1 overall (1985). “He’s also what the NHL needs right now. Indirectly, he’s promoting the sport in all of North America.”

But is he? Or rather: Can he shine in the Maple Leafs system? He was Toronto’s lone All-Star last season, and yet his image never appeared on a billboard inside the city. That’s very much by the Leafs’ design. General manager Lou Lamoriello believes

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

With 40 goals in his debut season, Matthews put himself in pretty good company among top rookie goal scorers in the past 20 years.



the face of the franchise is, and always will be, a royal blue image of a leaf. Despite fresh successes, coach Mike Babcock is fond of saying the Leafs won’t “deviate from the plan.” Every rookie is shielded from extra attention, blocked from in-game interviews—and even barred from pretaped JumboTron segments like reading mean tweets.

The team’s restrained marketing approach to its transcendent talent is all the more remarkable given how much it values Matthews’ performance. On a team that signed veterans in hopes of returning to the Eastern Conference playoffs, it’s telling that the Leafs have not yet named a captain, dangling the C in front of Matthews like an inevitability. Even if he gets the title, the directive from management is simple: Matthews can speak but shouldn’t be treated differently from anyone else. And so for the sake of Toronto’s plan, imbued by well-worn tradition, the next great face of American hockey remains hidden above the border.

MATTHEWS WAS BORN in Scottsdale in 1997, a little over a year after the Winnipeg Jets relocated to Phoenix. His uncle Billy, a Coyotes season-ticket holder, brought his nephew to his first game when he was 2, and by 6, Auston was asking for skates. Ema grew up on a ranch in Hermosillo, Mexico, and knew little about hockey. Brian played baseball in college. They spoke English and Spanish around the dinner table; at home they called Auston “Papi.”

In the NHL’s ongoing battle for visibility, Matthews is already billed as a success story. Commissioner Gary Bettman told a summit on youth sports in July: “People make fun of us because we fight to preserve a franchise in Arizona, of all places. But one of the stars for the ages, who just played his first year

for the Toronto Maple Leafs, came from Scottsdale.” Bettman began splattering teams across the Sun Belt as soon as he became commissioner in 1993—believing a larger American footprint would correlate with better branding and sponsorships. It’s paid off, at least locally. In Matthews’ lifetime, the number of hockey players in Arizona has more than tripled, from 2,349 to 7,781. “In terms of interest in hockey [in Arizona], it’s been incredible the difference from when I first got here to where it is now,” says Shane Doan, who retired this past summer after 20 seasons with the Coyotes.

But the story of hockey’s larger growth has been shaky at best. While teams like Nashville and Tampa Bay have reached or won the Stanley Cup finals, the ebb and flow of new fan bases has caused the relocation machine to churn. The Jets gave birth to the Coyotes, but in 2011, the Jets were reborn in Winnipeg when the Atlanta Thrashers moved there. The Coyotes have suffered too; in 2009, the team had to be rescued from bankruptcy by the NHL.

While leaguewide attendance remains steady, individual teams in places like Raleigh, North Carolina, and Sunrise, Florida, struggle. Meanwhile, in the U.S., the NHL is a distant fourth in ratings to the NFL, the NBA and MLB.

All of which means the need for a truly transcendent player in hockey is that much greater.

IF HOCKEY WANTS a crossover celebrity, the type of athlete with dazzling skills who reaches new demographics, it should almost thank central casting for sending along Matthews. “People always stop him and ask for pictures,” says Rielly. “He always stops, but he’s reserved every time. It doesn’t seem natural for him. He hasn’t gotten used to it; he really doesn’t

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A historic four-goal debut last season put Matthews and his family (right) in the spotlight.



“IF I’M NOT AT AN ICE RINK, NOBODY KNOWS WHO I AM.”

AUSTON MATTHEWS

like the attention that much.”

At this point, though, he has appeared in exactly one commercial ... for a hockey stick. Matthews is sponsored by Bauer, the hockey equipment manufacturer, and that’s about it. He shares an agent with Penguins captain Sidney Crosby, someone who has experience being the next face of hockey. Crosby enjoys endorsements from Reebok and Gatorade and is now firmly at the level where he can’t wander around a mall unnoticed. But he never makes noise off the ice. He makes himself available to reporters at his locker each day but rarely says anything unpredictable. Everything about Matthews’ career—from an unusual draft-year stint playing in the Swiss league to limited media exposure—has been curated for a similar arc.

For the past three decades, the NHL’s marketing arm has relied on a tightly structured strategy, promoting the league through two appointed rivals, à la Batman vs. Superman. Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux graduated to suits and front offices. Then came Crosby and Capitals star Alex Ovechkin, who are now in their 30s. Likewise, Matthews is the natural foil to Oilers wunderkind Connor McDavid.

This strategy doesn’t allow for individuality, the petty tweets or fashion stunts that mark other leagues. The NHL courts compliance and calls it tradition. Players bow their heads and do what they’re told, which softens their Q rating. P.K. Subban, the Nashville defenseman of bow-and-arrow celebration and fur coat fame, is the outlier—and he gets called “divisive” for having fun.

It’s completely at odds with the rest of the sports world. Aaron Judge landed in a sketch on the

Tonight Show With Jimmy Fallon before he made his first All-Star team. Texans rookie QB Deshaun Watson fed the hype by showing up for his first game in a tux, then donated his paycheck to stadium workers affected by Hurricane Harvey. The entire world knew about Lonzo Ball before he was drafted.

“I’d like Connor McDavid to go out and date a celebrity,” Stars center Tyler Seguin says. “Go to the ESPYS like P.K. I’d love for the game to keep getting bigger and bigger. P.K. is maybe a little extra sometimes, but he’s personable.”

That extra is what it takes to be a star athlete. In the NHL, though, what sets you apart is often what makes you a problem. Matthews could be a once-in-a-generation star, pushing hockey toward a new—and diverse—fan base. But only if hockey lets him.

IT’S TWO WEEKS before the start of the regular season in Toronto, and inside the Leafs’ practice rink, Matthews peels off sweaty socks after the morning skate. As soon as he flings his jersey into the communal laundry basket, a dozen reporters descend upon his stall. “Wait, you want me to talk again?” Matthews says. “We did this, like, 10 hours ago.” It would be easy to read Matthews’ interview appre-

hension as snarky, but it seems incredulous more than anything. The next big face of hockey almost doesn’t realize that people care about what he has to say. So he obliges, and for five and a half minutes he stands stoically and ambles through careful sound bites.

National anthem protests? A no-go because “it’s like a dishonor to the men and women who fight for that flag, that fight for the U.S.”

It’s clear he’s trying to exercise his voice in small increments. That’s the tricky part about celebrity—in order to develop a voice, you have to be expected to have one. You have to want it, as much as anything else. Matthews will be a star, but the question is whether he’ll fit the NHL’s mold or develop into something of his own making. He is 20, and it’s a choice he himself has to make. As the scrum unfolds, Matthews is asked a question that will chase him through his career: *How does he want to be a role model for Hispanic children?*

Standing away from his teammates with his arms crossed, Matthews rocks his weight from his left leg to his right. “Oh yeah,” he says, pausing a moment.

“I’d like to—I think—in the future be someone kids can look up to.” **E**

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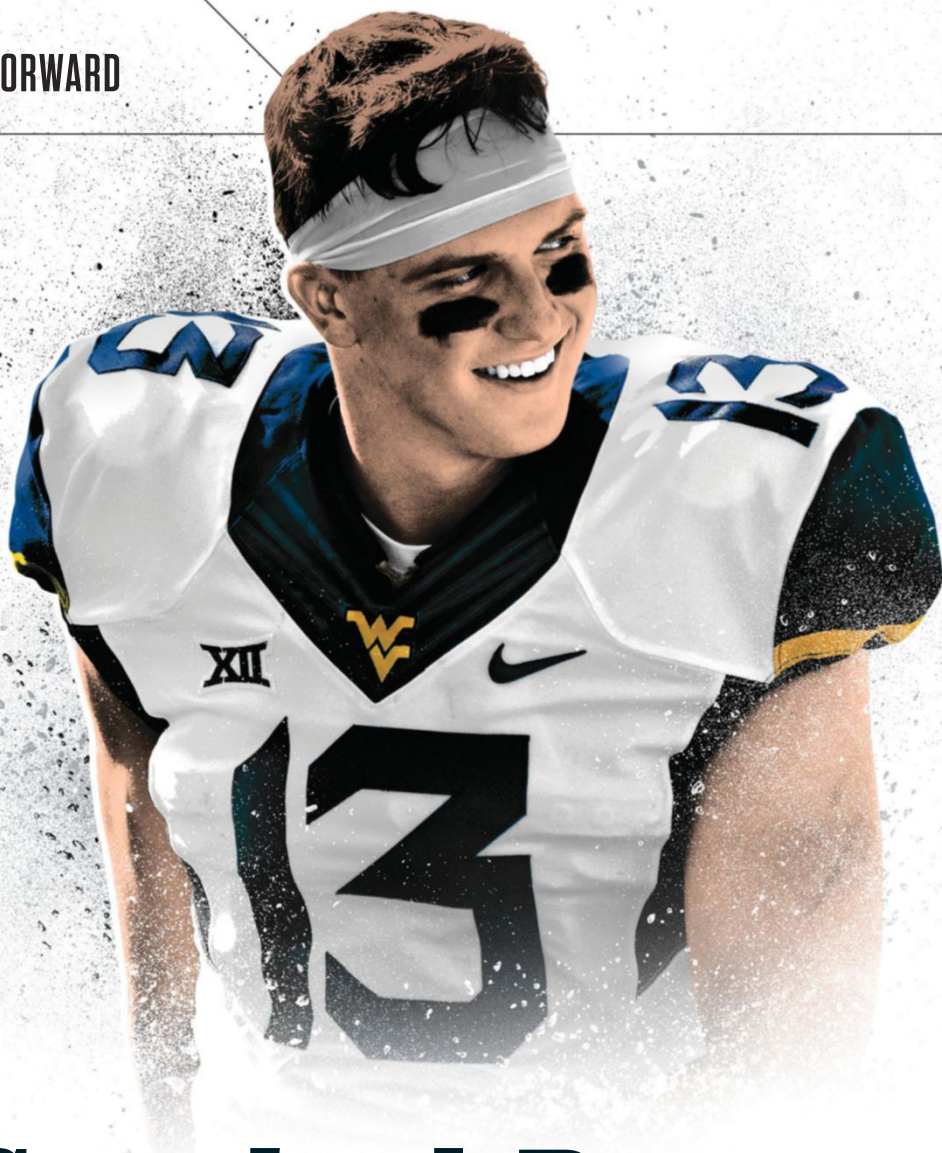
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Comeback Route

David Sills V was tagged a sure thing before he'd even finished eighth grade. Seven frustrating years and a position switch later, he's looking like a world-beater again. —JAKE TROTTER

Letting go wasn't easy. He'd been a quarterback so talented at 13 that Lane Kiffin offered him a scholarship to USC and the ensuing publicity made him a national name. At 15, his dad even founded an online school to build a team around him.

David Sills V never made it to USC, or as a QB. But he has re-emerged at West Virginia as one of college football's top receivers and its most surprising breakout star, leading the FBS with nine TD catches through his first five games.

"My story is nothing I would've pictured," he says. "But I'm having so much fun now, the most fun I've ever had playing football."

His story first came to light when Kiffin offered

him in 2010 after watching a single YouTube clip. "He seemed so far advanced for his age," Kiffin says, "that if he stayed on track, he'd be an elite player." But just as Kiffin anointed him, Sills' track changed course. He started on varsity as an eighth-grader and as a freshman at Red Lion Christian Academy in Bear, Delaware, before the school de-emphasized football. Sills' dad then started an online school for his son and teammates. But Eastern Christian Academy failed to get accredited by the state of Maryland, limiting Sills to three games as a sophomore. He then broke a knuckle as a junior, permanently altering his perfect motion. A broken ankle then ended his senior season in 2014 after three games.

Kiffin was famously fired on the LAX tarmac the season before, and new USC coach Steve Sarkisian courted two other QBs, including Sam Darnold. But West Virginia coach Dana Holgorsen saw promise in the former prodigy: "The ball didn't come out great, but I loved his demeanor and mentality, his savvy and all the intangibles. I wanted him on my team."

As a freshman in 2015, Sills was redshirting as a scout team quarterback and spent time impersonating bigger receivers. "He just started tearing it up," Holgorsen says, adding that defensive coordinator Tony Gibson said nobody could cover Sills.

Sills burned his redshirt to play receiver in Week 7, catching a touchdown at Baylor and one more two months later in the bowl game. But dissatisfied as a part-time QB, Sills told Holgorsen he was leaving to give it one last try at El Camino College, just down the road from USC in Torrance.

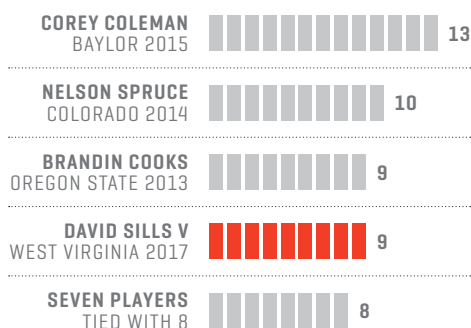
"You think you'll play in the Coliseum with 100,000 watching," Sills says, "and you actually play 20 miles down the road with 500 watching."

Over 10 games, he threw for more than 1,600 yards and 15 TDs. But the offers never came—except for one, from Holgorsen, who asked Sills to come back. "Quarterback is 100 percent out of my system," he says. "If I'd stayed [at West Virginia], I don't think I would've gotten it out."

Now applying his full focus to receiver, he's a phenom all over again. "He's a legitimate NFL prospect. He's a 6-foot-4 athlete with toughness and good hands," ESPN's Mel Kiper Jr. says, noting that Sills would likely enter the draft in 2019.

"I've never been more impressed with somebody," says West Virginia quarterback Will Grier. "It's the most interesting story I've ever been a part of. It's absolutely insane, and I love it. There's going to be a 30 for 30 on him someday."

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Bunchie, who checks in at 4-foot-5 and 80 pounds, scored 30 TDs last season.

A Recruit for the Ages

Los Angeles trainer Mike Evans talks about college football recruit Maxwell “Bunchie” Young in familiar sound bites. He praises his speed, his personality and his work ethic. “Bunchie is a kid who comes around once every 10 years,” Evans says. In this case, the cliché holds true. Bunchie, all of 10 years old, holds a scholarship offer from Illinois. Evans’ business, LacedFacts Training, works out more than 150 kids. Soon, he says, recruiters everywhere will know Young and more of his clients. “We have one of the top 6-year-olds in the country,” Evans says. “But he looks 9!” It’s all too much too soon for some. “He might decide he likes baseball, or playing piano,” says one Power 5 school’s player personnel director. “You don’t know.” Hype and highlights aside, here’s what life looks like for a grade-school blue chip.

—KYLE BONAGURA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA LYTTLE



ALONG FOR THE RIDE Bunchie worked hard for his offer, training about 10 hours a week with Evans, in addition to pushing himself at home and running hills with his speed coach, Jonathan Ligons, who has helped him run a 12.45 100 meters. Back at LacedFacts, pupils pay up to \$285 a month to hit up the sleds, bear down on technique and square off in noncontact drills. Bunchie is known around the training center for his flair, but at KIPP Scholar Academy in South LA, administrators asked him to tone down the hair colors. Bunchie's just being Bunchie—a combination of speed and style that draws a parallel from Evans. "It's probably what you would have seen from Odell Beckham at a young age," he says. "Like, 'Wow, who is this guy?'" Evans says a Pac-12 team that wants to stay unidentified has also offered Young. Another pupil, Havon Finney Jr., age 9, has 22,000 Instagram followers and an offer from the Nevada Wolf Pack. But many college recruiters offer a heavy dose of skepticism. "You win the arms race by offering first," says the player personnel director, "but you don't know where that kid will be in eight years. Maybe he won't grow. It puts a lot of undue pressure on the kids."



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Clockwise from top left: Peyton Manning, Lorenzo Mauldin, Aaron Rodgers, Gerard Warren, Rhett Ellison and Ezekiel Elliott.

Waiting to Inhale

They offer players a putrid punch in the nose but likely little actual performance boost. So how exactly did smelling salts become an essential part of NFL game days?

BY DAVID FLEMING
ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY TODD ARCHER

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ne whiff and Ezekiel Elliott's eyelids begin to flutter, his mouth falls oddly agape and his pupils roll back in his head. It's Week 4 of the NFL season, and kickoff is just moments away inside AT&T Stadium, where Elliott and a handful of his Cowboys teammates are breathlessly engaged in the latest, strangest sports ritual: huffing the stomach-turning noxious fumes found in smelling salts.

The ammonia-based inhalant is manufactured for the express purpose of treating or preventing fainting, but at some point, NFL players and other athletes discovered they could repurpose the decongestant properties and adrenaline-pumping side effects into a perfectly legal, low-tech pick-me-up ... even though there's zero proof of any performance benefit. In fact, this will be the first of at least eight capsules for Elliott today. Using hand movements reminiscent of his trademark "feed me" gesture, Elliott inhales a capsule before donning his helmet for each Dallas drive in a 35-30 loss to the Rams. He's far from alone, on either team. Directly behind Elliott, two members of the Cowboys' game-day staff, dressed in matching blue slacks and white polos, are busy sniffing away on their own ammonia capsules. Just a few minutes into the game, the Cowboys have discarded so many capsules that the area in front of their bench looks like the floor of a kid's bedroom after trick-or-treating. (Don't change the Cowboys' moniker to Ammonia's Team just yet. There are dozens of discarded smelling salts capsules on the Rams' sideline too.)

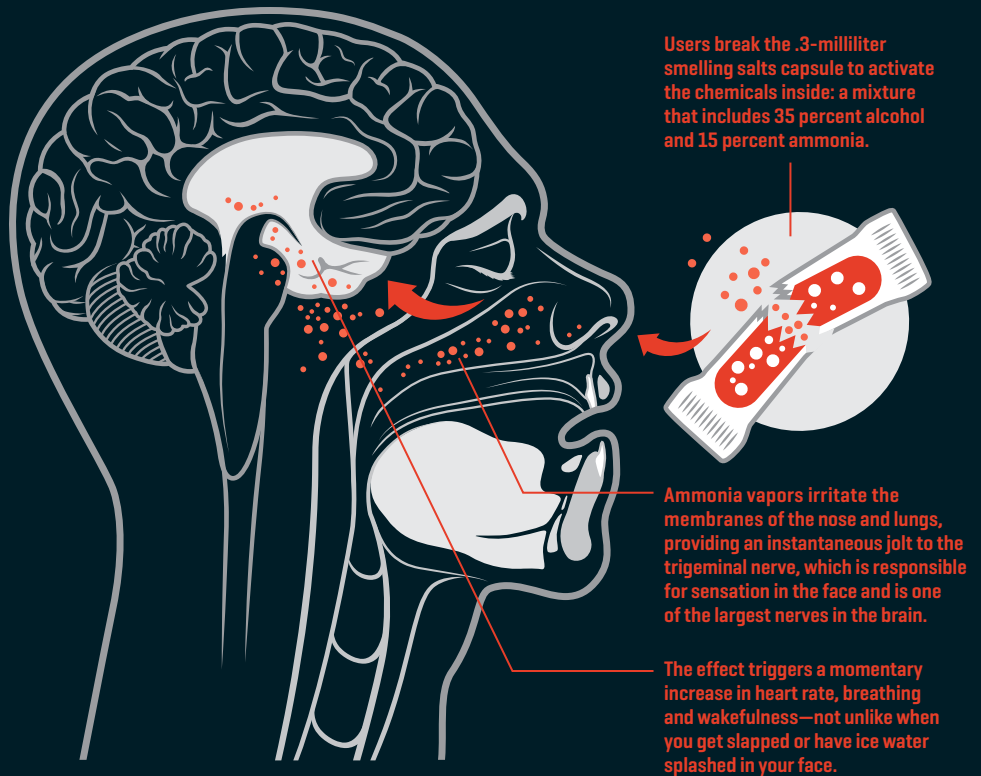
Near the end of the first half, six members of the Dallas defense can be seen simultaneously hitting the salts before taking the field. The group includes veteran cornerback Orlando Scandrick, who jogs onto the field while using his right hand to make the sign of the cross and his left hand to sniff salts, and defensive end Demarcus Lawrence, the NFL's sack leader through four games.

Lawrence says he can't drink coffee for a quick jolt during the game because it might affect his stomach, so he has turned to smelling salts. "The ammonia wakes you up, opens your eyes," Lawrence explains. "You'll be on the bench, you start to get a little tired and you got to wake your body up, and that's what that little ammonia does for you."

SALT MINDS

Although the use of smelling salts in sports is not generally thought to be dangerous, experts still don't recommend them, in part because there's no proven benefit.

Dr. Philip G. Chen, a board-certified ear, nose and throat surgeon at the University of Texas Health San Antonio, explains why. —CHARLOTTE GIBSON



What's happening in the body when someone sniffs smelling salts?

Theoretically, the unpleasant odor informs the brain that a threat or toxic substance is nearby, and therefore one needs to awaken and get to safety. The heart rate increases, you take deeper and more rapid breaths to get more oxygen and the muscles contract in response to the danger. These effects would not last more than a minute or two. And while these physiological effects were seen among weightlifters in [multiple] studies, in those studies there was no improvement in performance.

What happens when someone is using smelling salts multiple times per game, multiple times per week? What are the negative side effects?

Inhalation of large quantities may lead to irritation of the eyes, nose, throat and even lungs. While I have not heard of this occurring from smelling salts, ammonia, generally

speaking, mixes with oxygen to form ammonium hydroxide, which is very corrosive. Therefore, prolonged and significant exposure could result in chemical burns of the mucous membrane and skin. For some people, the noxious smell could trigger asthma-like symptoms.

What would be a better alternative?

I don't know that I can recommend any particular alternative, because nearly anything used out of context can be dangerous. Generally, anything unpleasant or jolting can temporarily awaken the senses. I would expect the ice-cold Gatorade bath the winning coach gets would work well. Smelling salts are typically safe in low doses when infrequently used. But considering that there is little evidence that it does much to improve performance and there is risk for adverse effects, I recommend using them only for fainting spells, as directed, and not as a pick-me-up.

Source: British Journal of Sports Medicine, Dr. Philip G. Chen



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It's not just a skill position thing: Here, linemen Joe Looney (near right) and Byron Bell pass the salt at the Cowboys-Rams game.



But that simple explanation, like the entire smelling salts fad itself, doesn't quite pass the sniff test.

ONCE PRESCRIBED TO Victorian-era women plagued by fainting spells, ammonia inhalants are now manufactured in single-use capsules the size of a small stick of gum. Each sealed white plastic wrapper contains a .3-milliliter mix of alcohol (35 percent), ammonia (15 percent), water, oils and red dye that, when crushed between two fingers, stains the wrapper a telltale pink. Aerated by the alcohol, the ammonia fumes pack such a rancid punch—imagine military-grade concentrations of Windex, wasabi and Vicks VapoRub that get T-shirt-cannoned up both nostrils—that most users instinctively snap their heads back to escape the stench.

The initial discomfort is quickly followed by a sensation that your breathing pathways have not just opened up but expanded exponentially while ramping up your alertness to an almost euphoric level. This phase is short-lived, however: Lawrence says that for him, it lasts about one set of downs. Also, the initial wave can sometimes be followed by prolonged bouts of nausea that serve as a vivid reminder of why household ammonia products come with the warning: *Avoid inhalation of vapors*.

“The claim is that smelling salts arouse your consciousness and focus, but how many of us in our daily lives think it's appropriate during a tough day at work

to open a bottle of ammonia and start sniffing the fumes?” says Dr. Joseph Estwanik, a fellow with the American College of Sports Medicine. “Ammonia's intended use is for cleaning. Giving a highly trained elite athlete ammonia to help them perform at their peak is like throwing a drowning man a cup of coffee.”

The company that manufactures the NFL's capsules, the New Jersey-based James Alexander Corp., has repeatedly stated that the product is designed to treat or prevent fainting. A company spokeswoman had no response when asked about the widespread misuse of smelling salts in the NFL. Ignoring the topic seems to be the common response when it comes to the league's secret little helper. Even though the capsules are typically distributed by athletic trainers, the National Athletic Trainers' Association wouldn't discuss the topic and doesn't have official guidelines on the use of ammonia capsules.

There is one clear, though indirect, danger to using smelling salts: In the past, they've been routinely used to mask and combat concussion symptoms in sports such as boxing and football. In 2011, after quarterback Terry Bradshaw began experiencing the effects of brain damage suffered during his Hall of Fame career in Pittsburgh, he wrote: “When I played for the Steelers and I got my bell rung, I'd take smelling salts and go right back out there. All of us did that.”

For that reason, the practice of using salts has

been banned for decades by major boxing organizations, and in the NFL, league spokesman Brian McCarthy says “team medical staffs do not use [smelling salts] in any way for the treatment of any concussion or other injury.

“We have seen no proven performance enhancement and minimal risk,” he says. “Team medical staffs monitor all aspects of their players' care.”

In college football, salts are already common. And Estwanik wants the NFL to outlaw ammonia before the league's huffing habit becomes just as widespread on the high school level, where there isn't enough medical supervision to prevent the use of ammonia to mask conditions such as asthma, dehydration and head injuries.

IN THE NFL, players sure don't seem concerned about the dangers, and they don't seem all that bothered by the fact that there's no scientific proof smelling salts actually work. Instead, they remain focused on anecdotal evidence that suggests the ammonia in smelling salts irritates the highly sensitive membranes in the nose and lungs, disrupting normal breathing patterns and inducing what's known as an “inhalation reflex,” or the body's emergency survival instinct to restore stasis. The ammonia may also hyperstimulate the large trigeminal nerve that runs from the nostrils to deep inside the brain stem and thalamus. While doctors and trainers remain

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skeptical, athletes swear that this combination of responses to the gas triggers the nervous system's powerful fight-or-flight response, temporarily spiking levels of breathing, heart rate and alertness.

Even if it's all the result of a placebo effect, NFL players just know it's legal and it works ... kinda. "It's such a painful smell, it's like a slap in the face," says Rams linebacker Connor Barwin, who was photographed making a Dr. Seuss-like face after sniffing salts during a 2013 game. "If you're going to go hit somebody, you better be ready, so this just wakes you up a bit, gets you locked and ready and alert."

Because of that effect, perceived or not, former U.S. men's national soccer team star Landon Donovan popped a capsule before every match. Extra-strength smelling salts featuring brand names like Nose Tork and Wake Up Motherfxxxxr are targeted toward the powerlifting market. Ammonia capsules also remain popular in the NHL, except maybe in Boston, where in 2013, then-Bruins center Tyler Seguin accidentally tossed a discarded capsule into a fan's beer.

In the NFL, where Brett Favre, Peyton Manning, Bengals coach Marvin Lewis and scores of others have been photographed while indulging, one former trainer estimated that more than 80 percent of players use smelling salts. (Former Giants star Michael Strahan once put that number in the 70 to 80 percent range too.) If they were used strictly as a treatment for fainting, a football team should go through maybe a handful of capsules the entire season. In just that one game against the Rams, the Cowboys left more than 100 broken capsules on their sideline. "The term I keep coming back to with the NFL and smelling salts is 'not for the intended use,'" Estwanik says. "And a similar term for that is just 'abuse.'"

The optics aren't exactly ideal for an image-conscious corporation like the NFL. YouTube clips and social media threads of players sniffing salts typically inject snide references to drug use. In a Week 3 Monday night game against the Cardinals, cameras captured what looked like a scene straight out of an after-school special on inhalants when an oblivious Elliott huffed away while Dallas running backs coach Gary Brown yelled in his ear. Days later, network TV cameras in Green Bay captured a Gollum-eyed Clay Matthews enjoying several long, seemingly mind-altering pulls before taking the field against the Bears. These days, Tom Brady might be a well-known health food nut who won't poison his body with so much as a single tomato, but just a few years ago he could regularly be seen on the Patriots bench rewiring his thalamus with a cupful of ammonia capsules alongside his wide receivers. "We all do it," Brady told a Boston radio



"SMELLING SALTS ARE A CLASSIC, COMICAL EXAMPLE OF HOW NFL PLAYERS THINK."

FORMER NFL TRAINER

station when network cameras discovered his smelling salts habit. "It's kind of a receiver-and-quarterback thing."

Instead of something sinister, though, what the widespread use of smelling salts really reveals is the increasingly bizarre culture created by the NFL's win-at-all-costs pressure cooker. Extreme parity, the minuscule margin of error, the constant threat of injury and million-dollar stakes all push players to exploit any shortcut, no matter how weird, gross or pitiful. More than a century ago in major league baseball, players like Hall of Fame pitcher Pud Galvin thought consuming ground-up monkey testicles was the answer (seriously). A decade ago, football found deer antler spray. Now it's smelling salts.

The NFL mentality has always been: If a little pregame caffeine is good, six Red Bulls is even better. If a little spray Stickum is good for the hands, then several cans can only be better. Therefore, if there's even a chance that one dose of ammonia improves breathing, alertness and performance, then 10 capsules a game can only be better. "Smelling salts are a pretty harmless way for players to clear their heads before battle," says a former NFL trainer

with more than 30 years' experience. "They're also a classic, comical example of how NFL players think. If one guy does it and he has even some small bit of success with his new routine or superstition, the next week everyone will be doing it."

So does it matter if all the benefits are in players' heads?

"It might provide a psychological advantage, whether it actually helps or not," says Dr. Robert Cantu, a former president of the American College of Sports Medicine and a senior adviser to the NFL Head, Neck and Spine Committee. "If Elliott thinks smelling salts work, then in his mind, he's going to gain more yardage if he uses them."

Not always. Back in Dallas, Elliott has 139 all-purpose yards and two touchdowns, but he's overshadowed by Rams running back Todd Gurley, who gains 215 all-purpose yards and puts Los Angeles ahead for good in the third quarter with a 53-yard touchdown reception. The Cowboys have a chance to win on their final possession, but with 36 seconds left to play, the drive stalls on fourth-and-10. Elliott is stopped at the 39. Yep, just a whiff shy of the first down. ■



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FANTASY FOOTBALL

Tricks of the Trades

Set aside your ego and play the long game to win your fantasy league's trophy. —AJ MASS

There's a guy in one of my fantasy leagues who peppers me with bad trade offers right up to the deadline. I no longer even open his emails, because I know the proposals are going to be ridiculously one-sided, with me giving up my superstar running back (presumably just after a 30-yard week) in exchange for whatever role player happened to have a once-in-a-career 100-yard, two-TD game that whipped up a ton of buzz.

I don't blame him for trying. For him, it's all about winning the trade, regardless of the long-term consequences. I prefer to operate from a different point of view. When you trade with me, I'm going to have no problem giving you more than I get back. Why? Because while you might win the trade, I'm the one who will win the trophy. Here are three ways I do it.

1 DEAL WITH THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

Let's say you're tied for your league's final playoff spot with time running out and the trade window still open. The owner with whom you're tied is playing a fairly competitive team but doesn't have a great QB1 situation. You, on the other hand, have Drew Brees on your bench every single week, behind Tom Brady. Trading Brees to the team facing your primary rival—even for far lesser value, like, say, Houston kicker Ka'imi Fairbairn—is a way to play defense in fantasy football and a painfully underused tactic. You lose no points from your weekly fantasy total and might even gain a few points at kicker. But even if Fairbairn doesn't help, you just gifted double-digit points to a team that can help you make the postseason. That's worth far more than the hurt pride from “losing a trade.”

2 TRADE FOR A SWEET, GOOD BYE

Once bye weeks start, most fantasy owners will go to the waiver wire early each week to pick up a kicker, D/ST or flex option. Smarter fantasy owners will have scoured the waiver wire a week earlier than that to be sure they get the cream of the crop instead of leftovers. Then there are the *really* savvy fantasy owners, who are looking several weeks ahead, studying the roster of the team they'll be playing then and targeting those owners with sweetheart deals.

The catch? Send them guys who'll be on a bye when your teams square off so they can't hurt you. So offer WR Alshon Jeffery and TE Jared Cook and ask for TE Austin Hooper and WR Terrelle Pryor Sr. in return. Since Atlanta (Hooper) and Washington (Pryor) both had byes in Week 5, if you make this deal in Week 8, you're covered at those positions going forward. When you play that owner in Week 10, it can only go in your favor, as both Philadelphia (Jeffery) and

Oakland (Cook) are on a bye. You might well end up losing the trade, but you'll win the matchup!

3 LOCK UP THE HANDCUFFS

Here's one more situation in which looking ahead can pay huge dividends. Let's say you're seemingly all set at running back with Le'Veon Bell and Leonard Fournette, and you already have their backups on your bench. A quick look at the waiver wire reveals there's not a single available back who is getting more than a touch or two per game. Look closer. A guy like Malcolm Brown of the Rams is probably there, and you should snag him.

Truth be told, he'll probably continue to have zero fantasy value. But if Todd Gurley ends up getting hurt, suddenly you'll have the most valuable trade chip on the market. Think it can't happen? Ask anyone who was gloating over having drafted Dalvin Cook how it felt after he went down in Week 4—and how others who had his backup were suddenly smiling a bit wider.





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Chef Heath Barbato
 “It’s Wisconsin, so hunting is a big thing. A few years ago, I did the Big Game Burger with venison in the playoffs.”

STADIUM FOOD DECONSTRUCTED

For Fans Hunting Big Game at the Big Game

1919 ELK STROGANOFF

LAMBEAU FIELD | COST: \$13 | ESTIMATED CALORIES: 900



When the days turn cold enough, the Packers serve up elk stroganoff for their fork-weather fans.

It’s been 50 years since the Ice Bowl, the coldest NFL game in history, was played at Lambeau Field. The halftime band’s instruments froze and a referee’s whistle fused to his lips. And for 50 years since, Packers fans have kept showing up, no matter the weather. To keep the crowds warm, the team now turns to Heath Barbato, executive chef of Lambeau’s 1919 Kitchen and Tap, who hawks his hearty dish for hardy fans: elk stroganoff topped with crème fraîche and julienned carrots. Here’s his inside dish on his made-for-the-outdoors dish.

Do you tailor your menu for winter conditions? Absolutely. We call it gloves-and-mittens weather. As soon as November hits Lambeau, you see nacho sales plummet—or anything you have to eat with your hands. We gear our food toward eating with a fork, or if it comes in a bun, that’s a bit easier. You don’t want to take your gloves off to eat.

Why did you decide to introduce this dish? It’s Wisconsin comfort food, kind of sticks to your ribs. There are a lot of people of Eastern European descent here, so stroganoff made sense. It turned into one of our best-selling menu entrées, so we kicked it out to concessions to see how it would go. **Your elk comes from a wild game farm. How important is responsible sourcing?** It’s very important that we’re actually putting *good* food into the fans’ bodies.

—INTERVIEW BY DAN HAJDUCKY

ELK STROGANOFF

INGREDIENTS

4 lbs. elk stew meat
 3½ tbsp. salt/pepper blend
 ¼ cup canola oil
 1 lb. yellow onion, diced
 ½ cup sherry
 ½ cup red wine
 ¼ cup Worcestershire sauce
 ⅔ cup veal glacé
 3 tbsp. tomato paste
 ½ gallon water
 ¼ cup beef base
 ½ lb. roux
 1 cup sour cream
 ½ lb. crimini mushrooms, quartered
 ½ lb. button mushrooms, quartered
 2 tbsp. canola oil

Recipe courtesy Delaware North.

INSTRUCTIONS

Cut meat into 1-inch cubes, season evenly with 3 tbsp. salt/pepper blend. Brown meat on all sides. Remove meat from the pan and set aside.

Add onions to the pan over medium heat. Allow the onions to sweat but not fully caramelize.

Deglaze the pan with sherry, red wine and Worcestershire sauce. Scrape the bottom of pan to release the cooked-on flavors, and reduce wine until almost dry.

Add veal glacé, beef base, tomato paste and water. Stir until fully incorporated.

Return meat and bring to a boil before reducing to a simmer. Cook on medium-low heat for about 3 hours, or until meat is tender.

Add cold roux and increase heat to boil for 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Mix in sour cream and 1 tsp. salt/pepper blend.

In a separate pan, sauté mushrooms on high heat until lightly golden.

Add mushrooms to meat pan and mix thoroughly.

ADDITIONAL INGREDIENTS

1 lb. dry pappardelle pasta
 4 qts. water
 2 tbsp. kosher salt
 1 cup heavy whipping cream
 2 tbsp. buttermilk

INSTRUCTIONS

In a large sauce pot, bring the water and salt to a rolling boil, add the pasta and cook for 8 to 10 minutes, stirring frequently. Strain pasta and toss with a little olive oil to prevent sticking.

For a crème fraîche drizzle, combine whipping cream and buttermilk in a glass container. Cover and let stand at room temperature for 8 to 24 hours or until very thick.

Divide pasta into 6 servings, top with elk stew. Drizzle with crème fraîche.

1919 Kitchen tops it with pickled julienne carrots. Makes 6 servings.

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Case Closed

What could be even more dramatic than the World Series? The MVP vote. For the first time in at least 87 years, both the NL and AL had four players who finished within 1.0 WAR of the league leader, according to The Ringer's Ben Lindbergh. So we asked Buster Olney and David Schoenfield to size up five leading contenders and tell us who will ascend to most valuable when the awards are announced in November.



Votto (left) and Altuve lead their stacked fields.

NATIONAL LEAGUE

NOLAN ARENADO
ROCKIES **5.6 WAR***

CASE FOR: The emotional leader of one of baseball's surprise teams dominated a lot of traditional stats, vying for the MLB RBI crown while racking up 87 extra-base hits and 100 runs.

CASE AGAINST: He walks less than other elite players, so his OBP is in the mere-mortal range of .373 [18th in the NL].

CHARLIE BLACKMON
ROCKIES **6.5 WAR**

CASE FOR: He scored 137 runs, the most in the big leagues, with an MLB-leading 213 hits, a staggering 86 of them for extra bases.

CASE AGAINST: The difference in home vs. road performance is just as staggering—his OPS at Coors Field [1.239] was 455 points higher than on the road [.784].

OLNEY'S PICK
JOEY VOTTO
REDS **6.6 WAR**

If you believe the skill of reaching base is the backbone of offense, then Votto was the National League's best player by far. He reached 321 times and led the NL in FanGraphs' wRC+ [runs created] by a decent margin of nine. As with Giancarlo Stanton, Votto's team was out of the running early, but his numbers are undeniable: a .454 on-base percentage [39 points better than the next-closest NL hitter] and a league-high OPS of 1.032.

PAUL GOLDSCHMIDT
DIAMONDBACKS **5.3 WAR**

CASE FOR: He was the heart of Arizona's surprising playoff drive, compiling big numbers in the good old-fashioned categories: 117 runs, 120 RBIs, 36 HRs and 18 SBs.

CASE AGAINST: He didn't rate as well in advanced metrics—seventh in wRC+, 10th in WAR—and he had a .555 OPS in September.

GIANCARLO STANTON
MARLINS **6.9 WAR**

CASE FOR: In a record-setting year for home runs, he hit more than anybody: 59. He was Baseball Reference's National League leader in WAR at 7.6.

CASE AGAINST: The Marlins were never really relevant. More to the point, Stanton had an OBP of only .376, 22nd in the majors. —BUSTER OLNEY

AMERICAN LEAGUE

AARON JUDGE
YANKEES **8.2 WAR**

CASE FOR: The biggest story of 2017 led the AL with 52 HRs and 128 runs while ranking second in RBIs, OBP and slugging. He crushed in September with 15 home runs.

CASE AGAINST: That 44-game slump when he hit .179 was a season unto itself. And he wasn't clutch, hitting .219 in high-leverage situations.

COREY KLUBER
INDIANS **7.3 WAR**

CASE FOR: Pitchers are eligible! He limited batters to a .193 average with a 34.1 percent K rate. He had 18 wins and led the majors in ERA (2.25), allowing no more than one run in 14 of 29 starts.

CASE AGAINST: Pitchers should win for transcendent seasons only! Kluber was bad in April and injured in May.

SCHOENFIELD'S PICK
JOSE ALTUVE
ASTROS **7.5 WAR**

A vote for Altuve is a vote for all-around brilliance: hitting, defense, baserunning. His 165 OPS+ was the highest for a second baseman since Joe Morgan in 1976; he won his third batting title in four seasons; and he hit .441 in late and close situations. Sure, Judge had the edge in runs scored [16 more], RBIs [33] and defensive runs saved [plus-9 to Altuve's plus-3], but Altuve's performance in clutch situations—while playing an up-the-middle position, no less—gives him the edge.

CHRIS SALE
RED SOX **7.7 WAR**

CASE FOR: His WAR led all MLB pitchers, and he became the first AL hurler with 300 K's since Pedro Martinez in 1999. Where would Boston have finished without Sale?

CASE AGAINST: He had a 4.09 ERA in the last two months and went 2-4 on the season with a 4.64 ERA against winning teams.

MIKE TROUT
ANGELS **6.9 WAR**

CASE FOR: He was easily the best player on a per-game basis, led the AL in both OBP and slugging percentage and nearly carried the Angels to the playoffs.

CASE AGAINST: He played just 114 games and faded in September [.237 average, .890 OPS] as the Angels missed out on a wild card. —DAVID SCHOENFIELD

* Using FanGraphs' version of WAR



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FEATURE AND AN ORAL
HISTORY OF THE
DEMISE OF THE BULLS,
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THE ONLY QUESTION WORTH ANSWERING THIS SEASON: *Who can beat the Warriors?* That's it! So we created a Warriors competition metric to project every team's performance this season against Golden State—then built this NBA preview around that. • Gone are divisions! Gone are conferences! (Who even needs 'em anymore?) What remains are these stories, all posing their own versions of The Question: Can the wonder-twin backcourt of the Rockets snub the Dubs? Did the crazy offseason of the Cavs and Celtics get them closer to a title? Will Lonzo Ball be part of the Lakers' solution—or part of their problem? Will the (loooong) reach of the Bucks exceed their grasp of Golden State? Can Blake Griffin paddle against the Warriors tide alone? • The answer to those questions: probably not! (Spoiler alert: The Warriors are good.) But good luck trying, NBA!

NBA VS.
WARRIORS
POWER
RANKINGS

- 1 **WARRIORS**
- 2 **ROCKETS**
- 3 **CAVALIERS**
- 4 **SPURS**
- 5 **CLIPPERS**
- 6 **BUCKS**
- 7 **NUGGETS**
- 8 **THUNDER**
- 9 **WOLVES**
- 10 **HEAT**
- 11 **RAPTORS**
- 12 **WIZARDS**
- 13 **JAZZ**
- 14 **HORNETS**
- 15 **PELICANS**
- 16 **CELTICS**
- 17 **BLAZERS**
- 18 **PISTONS**
- 19 **MAVERICKS**
- 20 **GRIZZLIES**
- 21 **LAKERS**
- 22 **76ERS**
- 23 **PACERS**
- 24 **MAGIC**
- 25 **BULLS**
- 26 **KNICKS**
- 27 **KINGS**
- 28 **NETS**
- 29 **SUNS**
- 30 **HAWKS**

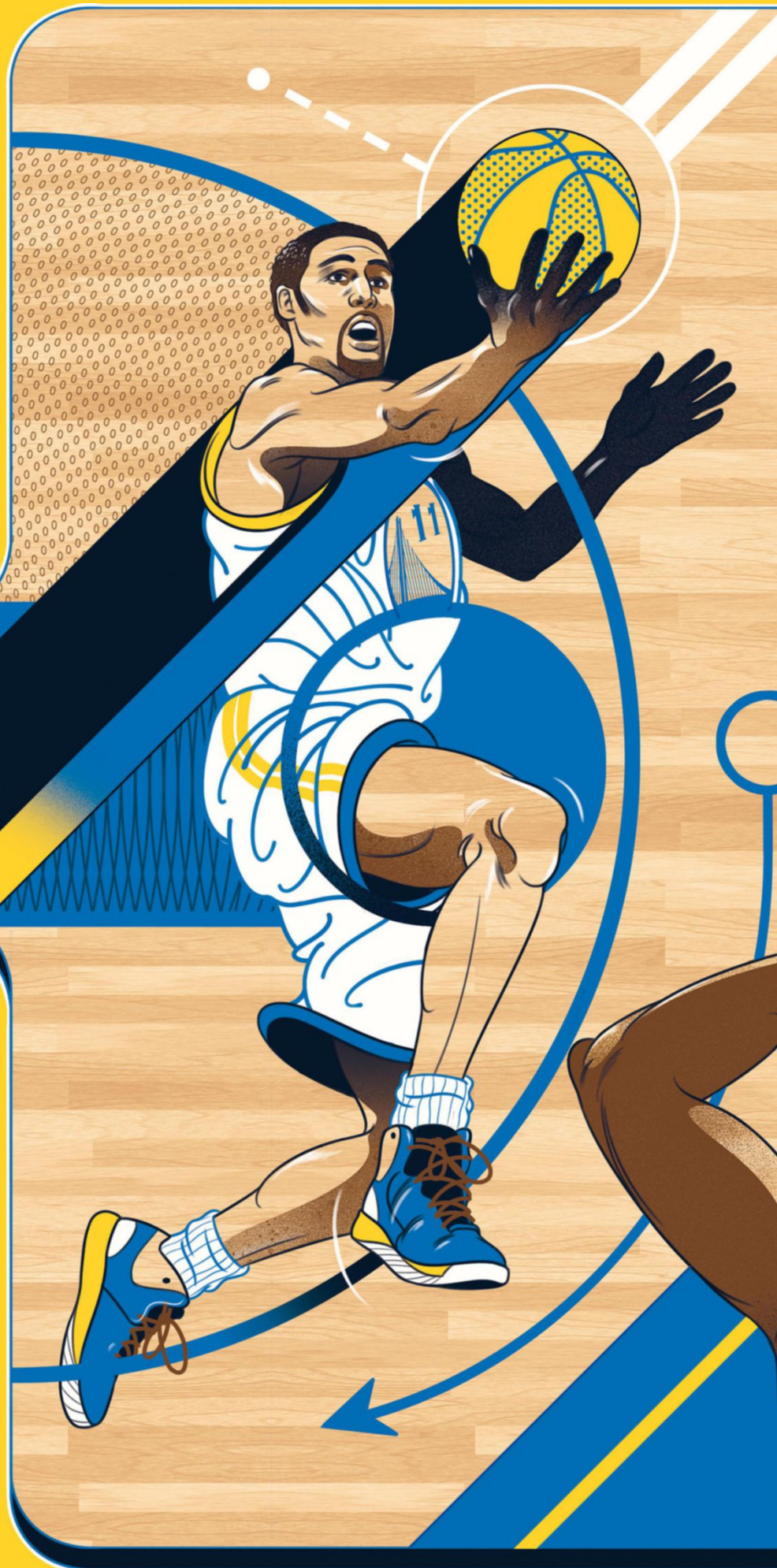
**NBA FINALS
PREDICTION**
**WARRIORS
OVER CAVS**

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

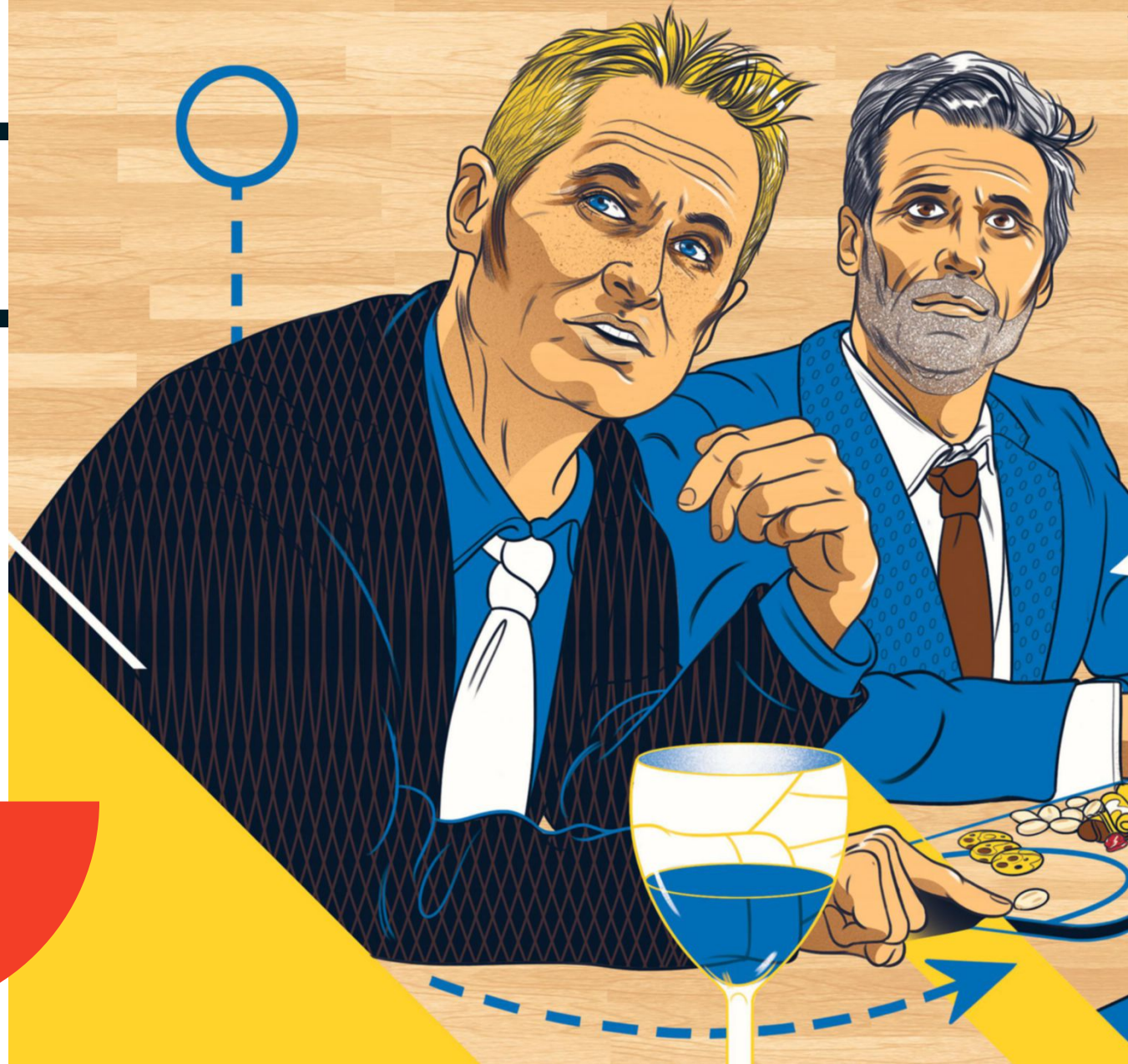
THE CHARCUTERIE BOARD THAT REVOLUTIONIZED BASKETBALL

In the past three years, the Warriors have won two NBA titles with the most explosive offense in history. This is the inside tale of how it all began—on a plate of appetizers.

BY BAXTER HOLMES
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREW ARCHER







THE SANCTUARY FOR the early check-ins, the merely laid-over and the maddeningly delayed is tucked between Gates 25 and 26 in Terminal 2 at Oakland International Airport. It's called *Vino Volo*, Italian for "wine flight," and it offers some 200 labels of the former, in advance of the aggravations of the latter.

It's 3:30 p.m. on a Friday in early August 2014 when two middle-aged men—both conspicuously tall, both with the loping grace of ex-athletes—commandeer chairs at the end of *Vino Volo*'s five-person bar. Seconds later, back in the kitchen, Kevin Ninkovich hears a shout from a colleague on the floor: *Steve Kerr just sat down.*

Ninkovich, a 28-year-old bartender at *Vino Volo*, is a Warriors obsessive. Growing up as a 5-foot-and-change guard, he even imagined himself as Kerr: a deadeye who lacked physical gifts but could drill a title-sealing trey if called upon. Now here the man is, the Warriors' new coach, named to the position just 10 weeks prior, sitting

alongside his old college teammate and newly named assistant Bruce Fraser.

Ninkovich is not about to let this chance slip away.

After another staffer takes their order—two glasses of pinot noir and a three-meat, three-cheese charcuterie board—Ninkovich preps it and bounds out of the kitchen, armed with an agenda. Ninkovich's fandom stretches back to the 1990s' "Run TMC" era, when Tim Hardaway, Mitch Richmond and Chris Mullin were the NBA's highest-scoring trio. Ninkovich loved how that team moved the ball and is no fan of the scheme installed by Kerr's predecessor, Mark Jackson. Jackson's Warriors had won 51 games the season before but had averaged just 247 passes per game—not merely the worst mark in the NBA that season but 15 fewer than the next-closest team. When those Warriors fell in the first round to the Clippers, Alvin Gentry, then a Clippers assistant, was left wondering why the Warriors played so much one-on-

one, isolation basketball. Personnel-wise, they reminded Gentry of the mid-2000s Suns, an offensive powerhouse led by point guard Steve Nash: Golden State had the dynamic point guard, the lethal perimeter scorers, the forwards who could pass, the high-IQ playmakers. *All they need*, Gentry thought then, *is the right scheme.*

All they need, Ninkovich thinks now, as he delivers the charcuterie board, *is the right scheme.*

So Ninkovich, with a captive audience of Warriors coaches, musters the courage to speak: *What are you going to do?* he asks Kerr. *Will our one-on-one offense end? Will you implement the triangle offense?*

"Funny you should mention that," Kerr replies. "We've got some ideas. Here, I'll show you."

And then, as Fraser looks on, Kerr swipes clear the wooden board, casting the handle in the role of a basket. He positions the board's dried cranberries and marcona



almonds into two five-on-five teams in a half-court setting, with the cranberries relegated to defense. Suddenly, Almond Stephen Curry, hovering near the top of the key, swings an imaginary ball to Almond Klay Thompson on the wing, then cuts to the near corner while Thompson dumps it down to Almond Andrew Bogut. Thompson and Curry set picks for each other along the perimeter while Bogut weighs his options: find open almonds or back down his helpless cranberry.

These, Kerr explains, are aspects of the triangle offense, which he played in during the Bulls' 1990s heyday. But then Kerr pulls back, giving the noshes a breather. He notes that the Warriors would be foolish to run the triangle exclusively; it wouldn't best use their outside shooters. No, Kerr says.

They'll run a hybrid.

These ideas have been rattling around in Kerr's head for weeks. But he hasn't yet begun to diagram plays, or the scheme itself. Until now. And so for 10 minutes, Ninkovich

Taking lessons from the triangle and Mike D'Antoni's pace-and-space, the Warriors' offensive hybrid began, of all places, on a charcuterie board.

watches as Kerr lays the foundation for the most devastating offense the NBA has not yet seen—if only he could somehow turn the league's worst passing team into its best.

FOUR WEEKS LATER, the Warriors' new coaches are convening at a Napa Valley resort for a three-day meet-and-greet. There's tennis. There's swimming. There's plenty of wine. There's a croquet tournament that Gentry, now a Warriors assistant, will win (proclaiming, in the aftermath, "I'm the greatest black croquet player ever!" before stripping off his shirt and pouring Perrier over everybody). The mood is light, but everyone understands the task. Coaches exchange ideas, watch hours of film—four sessions of three to four hours each. And it's here, with the preseason a few weeks away, that Kerr outlines the plan for his staff, the one that's been marinating throughout his career and began to ripen on that *Vino Volo* charcuterie board.

In Kerr's mind, it's both simple and radically complex. He envisions elements from Phil Jackson's triangle, which called for passing from all five players. He'd loved how that system used Bulls forwards and centers as passers, perfect for Bogut, David Lee and others. Still, he doesn't want to abandon the high-screen-and-roll actions Curry had used in prior seasons to rain down 3s. Instead of employing a full-on triangle, what Kerr wants is a blended system. And there is much to cram into the blender.

In the mid-1990s, the Jazz, whom his Bulls had twice faced in the Finals, tormented Kerr. Those Jazz would feed the ball to forward Karl Malone in the post before guards John Stockton and Jeff Hornacek would screen for each other, with the open player receiving the ball back from Malone. Those actions are dubbed "split cuts," and Kerr hated guarding them. To him, guarding movement is far more challenging than guarding isolation—a "nightmare," he calls it—and he envisions a similar nightmare for defenses guarding Curry and Thompson. It's also a matter of taste. "Iso basketball, where one guy is going one-on-one and everybody is standing around, I don't like that," Kerr says. "I don't like that at all."

On defense, the Warriors are stout, loaded

with long-limbed forwards who can easily switch on any pick-and-roll. Kerr doesn't want to tinker with a squad that ranked third in defense the season before. But offensively, they ranked 12th. Kerr knows that nine of the previous 10 NBA champs ranked in the top 10 in both categories. He'd told GM Bob Myers that if they wanted to win a title, they'd need to do the same. Transitioning from heavy isolation to heavy passing and movement would be dramatic, but "there's a makeup in every player who's ever played," Kerr says, "that if you get to touch the ball and you get to be a part of the action—whether it's as an assist man, ball mover, shooter, dribbler—the more people who are involved in the offense, the more powerful it becomes." As Myers puts it: "All of us want to be part of something."

Still, Kerr knows he has one problem—and a vexing one at that: It's easier to persuade a bad team to evolve than one that just won 50 games. Kerr has seen new coaches slash and crash upon being hired; with a good team, he needs to tread lightly. As the eight-game preseason slate approaches, pressure is mounting. Normally, such games carry minimal stakes, a chance

1. WARRIORS

LAST SEASON: 67-15

PROJECTED WINS

62.3 REAL PLUS-MINUS	66 SUMMER FORECAST	67.5 LAS VEGAS
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How to beat the Warriors? Find players who match up on both ends. So say metrics! We compared every player's offensive and defensive real plus-minus last season to the average for his position. The weaker of the two numbers is his two-way rating. Turns out, teams with higher cumulative two-way ratings (like the Cavs) outperformed expectations against the Dubs in the playoffs. So to see how each team would fare against the 2017-18 Warriors, we used its two-way rating to adjust its RPM projection. Is your team close? Probably not! But read on. —KEVIN PELTON AND TOM HABERSTROH

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	114
NBA AVG.	104

to tinker with lineups or plays. Teams don't try hard to win. Not so these Warriors, who are unveiling Kerr's dramatic new scheme. The coaches believe that they need to win, that *it* needs to work—or they'll risk losing their players. And then there's this: For all of Kerr's experience in the NBA, he has zero experience as a head coach.

IF YOU WERE casting the role of metrics guru, Sammy Gelfand would almost be too on the nose. A bespectacled, scruffy-haired Chicagoan, Gelfand, the Warriors' manager of analytics, was one of the few holdovers from Mark Jackson's staff. Still, Kerr and Gelfand are kindred spirits. Just as Kerr is the sort to diagram plays with snacks, Gelfand grew up doing similar things with his breakfast cereal, staging elaborate games with his Lucky Charms, keeping score, his mind always at work. And so it is that during the preseason, Kerr turns to Gelfand in search of a concise, gettable metric that can serve as a benchmark for the team and, in so doing, unite it.

When they sit down to analyze the previous season, in search of a Grand Unifying Metric, one figure stands out. "What about this one—passes per game?" Gelfand asks.

Kerr considers it. It fits right in with the culture he hopes to develop. He looks at Gelfand. "What's a good number?"

Gelfand knows the Warriors ranked last in the NBA in that category under Jackson in 2013-14. He also knows that many of their turnovers had come, counterintuitively, on possessions in which they passed the ball less than twice. The less they passed, the sloppier they played. He also knows that when they passed more than three times in a single possession, they led the league in points per possession on such plays. In essence, when the Warriors moved the ball, "we were," Gelfand says, "almost unstoppable." They just didn't do it much.

Now, in search of their number, they analyze teams whose styles they want to emulate. The Bobcats, who led the league the year before with 338.2 passes per game? Nope. Too much of a leap. Besides, they barely posted a winning record. The defending-champ Spurs? Aiming for 334 passes, as the Spurs had the season before, was also

359

The Warriors' passes per game in Kerr's first season, almost 30 percent higher than in the previous season.



too lofty. When the Warriors tracked their passes in preseason games using Kerr's new scheme, the squad routinely hit the 280 mark. And so over the course of the two-week preseason, a nice round figure was identified—something easy to remember but challenging to attain: 300.

"CAN WE EVEN do this?" Myers wonders.

It's early November, and doubt is creeping into the mind of the Warriors' GM. His team has begun the season 5-0, but basketball-wise, it's a disaster. The Warriors are racking up turnovers like they're storing them for winter—averaging 21.6 per game. That's not only the worst mark in the league, it's about five turnovers per game more than the worst team in the prior season and only a few off the worst mark in NBA history.

After each game, Gelfand has been feeding Kerr postgame statistical reports, and the first stats listed are always passes: passes per game, secondary assists, free throw assists, the number of possessions with zero to two passes, three to five, six-plus. In morning film sessions, while coaches show players 15 to 20 clips from the previous game, they also post passing totals. And indeed, the Warriors are hitting that 300-per-game mark—averaging 320.8, in fact, through the first five games.

The good news? The team is passing. The bad news? Now they're *overpassing*.

"Don't pass for the sake of it," Kerr implores his team. "If you're open, shoot it. If not, pass it. But don't be stationary. Move!"

Still, it's a struggle, like a classical flutist

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PASSING BY NUMBERS

Oh, what a difference a year can make. In 2013-14, the season before Steve Kerr came to Oakland, the Dubs averaged an NBA-low 247 passes per game. The result? Fifty-one wins and a first-round exit. The next year: 316 passes per game, 67 wins—and a title.

trying to learn to play jazz flute—onstage, in real time. In a Nov. 9 loss to Phoenix, the Warriors tally 26 turnovers—10 by Curry alone—after also notching 26 the game before against Houston.

Curry, for his part, is relying on what Kerr calls “horrible tendencies”—careless left-handed hook passes over the tops of defenses—but also doing something far worse: remaining stationary after making passes. Defenses are manhandling Curry, and Kerr tells his star to run from pressure, not fight it, that even a back cut without getting the ball is a productive play because he’s taking the defense with him. Instead, Curry is, as Kerr came to call it, “dancing” in place—and stopping their offense as a result. Meanwhile, Draymond Green, former second-round draft pick, is trying too hard to establish himself as one of the team’s top playmakers. He’ll show potential, then become frustrated if he fails. “Keep it simple,” the staff tells the third-year forward. “You can make plays, but make the simple play.”

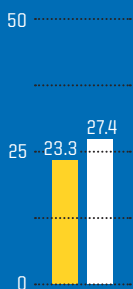
For weeks, Kerr has harped on the turnovers. In August, Kerr had visited Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll during his team’s training camp and had seen, in the Seahawks’ defensive meeting room, a football on a rubber handle attached to a wall; as players came in and out, they’d hit the ball, trying to knock it loose. Carroll believed the habit would cause more fumbles. Ball possession, Carroll preached, is everything.

For the first six games, in this regard, the Warriors have been a white-hot mess—like a race car with a wobbly wheel. Game seven, Nov. 11, would be a date with the Spurs, defending champions and the gold standard for ball movement. Kerr had played four seasons under Spurs coach Gregg Popovich and had admired how the Spurs’ passing helped foster a selfless, team-first culture.

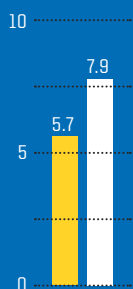
“It wasn’t just play your best five guys to

■ 2013-14
■ 2014-15

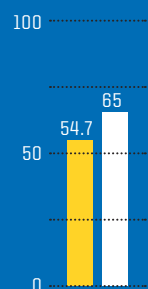
ASSISTS PER GAME



“HOCKEY ASSISTS” PER GAME



POINTS OFF ASSISTS PER GAME



death,” Kerr says. “It was play everybody. You go deep into your rotation, even if it means losing a couple of games in the regular season, just empower everybody. It’s kind of the beauty of basketball, the old cliché about the total being greater than the sum of its parts—I believe in all of that. Five guys have to operate together, but the other seven on the bench, or nine, however many, they’ve got to feel part of it.”

Revenge would also be a factor. The Spurs had beaten the Warriors in the playoffs two seasons earlier, then swept them in the regular season the year before Kerr arrived. “The reason we made all these changes,” Gelfand says, “was to get on their level.” From day one, Curry recalls, Kerr had talked about the Spurs and their legacy. Though the season is young, the Warriors know this game will be a measuring stick.

They do not measure up.

It begins well enough, the Warriors clinging to a 38-34 lead midway through the second quarter. But then the Spurs hit their stride. With less than a minute before halftime, forward Boris Diaw pump-fakes two Warriors on the perimeter, drives and zips the ball to Manu Ginobili on the right wing, who catches it with his left hand and in the same motion whips it to the right corner, where Tony Parker has enough time to do his taxes before swishing a 3-pointer. Six seconds of perfection.

After halftime, the Spurs cash in on more sloppy Warriors turnovers—an errant pass by Curry, a fumble by Green. By this point in the season, Kerr has seen so many mistakes that he’s been repeating, repeatedly, the phrase: “We’re just slingin’ the ball around out there!” It’s like a mantra. Or a koan. He’s saying it so much that his wife, Margot, has begun chiding him for it. And that’s what Kerr sees against the Spurs: more carelessness, more *slingin’* the ball.

The Spurs, who feature the same Big Three—Tim Duncan, Ginobili and Parker—they had when Kerr played beside them a dozen years before, cruise to a 113-100 win. In the locker room, Kerr explains to his deflated team that it doesn’t matter that the Warriors had outshot the Spurs. Not only had they lost the turnover battle, 19-8, they’d

lost their focus. “Look, guys,” Gentry adds, “you don’t want to say it, but this is how we want to play. This is who we want to emulate.”

It’s an enigma—and a conundrum. They need to play with pace but protect the ball. They need to play unselfishly but not too unselfishly. Pass the ball, but don’t turn down a great shot.

“Can we do that?” Kerr asks.

IT’S JUNE 13, 2017, 24 hours after the Warriors have won their second championship in three years. They’ve humiliated the Cavaliers in five games, and Volo in Oakland International Airport is abuzz, as usual. Wine unites everyone, Volo’s staffers like to say. But it’s seats C1 and C2 at the end of the bar, where Kerr and Fraser sat on that August afternoon, that to them are now legend.

Lawrence Flores, a 36-year-old assistant manager, was working the floor that day, stealing peeks at Kerr’s demonstration. He’s told the story a dozen times to friends and family. “That could’ve been the creation of this offense,” he tells them. “That could’ve been the start.” When Ninkovich, now 32, watches the Warriors, he sometimes sees not players but cranberries and almonds.

After their loss three seasons ago to the Spurs and inspired by the manner in which San Antonio had filleted them, the Warriors went on to win their next 16 games. “It was,” Kerr says of that Spurs loss, “the best thing that could’ve ever happened to us.” Pre-Spurs loss, the Warriors had ranked last in turnover percentage, with Green amassing more turnovers than assists. The rest of the season, they would rank sixth in turnover percentage, with Green averaging twice as many assists as turnovers.

And the epiphany arrived just five days after that Spurs defeat. By virtue of a schedule quirk, the Warriors were granted a four-day break after a road game against the Lakers, and when Kerr entered the visitors locker room at Staples Center before tip-off, he proffered a deal: “Play the way we’ve been talking about and play the right way—take care of the ball, defend, do all that stuff—and I’ll give you the next two days off.” The players literally gasped in disbelief.

That night, there wasn’t one moment, or a



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**"IT'S THE BEAUTY OF
BASKETBALL ... THE
TOTAL BEING GREATER
THAN THE SUM
OF ITS PARTS."**

WARRIORS COACH STEVE KERR

singular play, but a river of them—a constant flow, the ball pinballing around the court, side to side, to the tune of 343 passes. "Beautiful," Kerr says, thinking back on it. The Warriors scored a season-high 136 points.

In the days prior, what Kerr had wanted was to know that his words were being heeded. "You just want to know the ship is heading in the right direction," he says. And as he watched the rout unfold, he saw everything he had been preaching, his players carrying out his vision with focus and flair.

The transformation was radical—and ruthlessly effective. By the end of the season, the Warriors ranked second in offensive efficiency and first in defensive efficiency. They averaged 315.9 passes per game, nearly 70 more than the season before—the second-biggest leap in the league. They had the highest increase that season in assists per game and secondary assists per game, and the second-highest jump in assist-to-turnover ratio. They would go on to win an NBA-record 73 games the next season, falling one win shy of a second consecutive NBA title, and Curry would win his second straight NBA MVP award, just as Nash had done in Phoenix exactly one decade earlier

in the offense that so inspired Kerr.

The Warriors ultimately found that if defenses were panicked about the first pass, by the time their third pass arrived they were rewarded with a wide-open corner 3. "The main goal," Curry says, "is to just make the defense make as many decisions as you can so that they're going to mess up at some point with all that ball movement and body movement and whatnot. But it took awhile for us to kind of get the understanding of where each other was going to be without having to call a set play or whatnot. So it took awhile."

Actually, it took eight regular-season games.

The Dubs' assists per game since Kerr arrived? The three highest rates in the past 20 years.

It took. And it held: The Warriors today claim the three highest assist-per-game averages of the past two decades. And all have come in the past three years. "I can't sit here and say we knew this was going to happen," Fraser says, "but if I go back and read Steve's thesis on what he wished for, it's very close to what happened."

Consider: Since the start of the 1995-96 season, nine of the 10 best teams in offensive efficiency were either the mid-'90s Bulls (where Kerr played), the Nash-led Suns (where Kerr managed) or Kerr's modern-day Warriors. Kerr's basketball journey weaved through offensive greatness, and then he built his own.

"It was like it was destiny to have Steve come in and try to coach that way," says Luke Walton, former Warriors assistant coach, "because they were built to play that way."

And after two seasons alongside Kerr, soon after Walton agreed to take over the rebuilding Lakers, the new Lakers coach announced to his team that he wanted to create a nightly goal. He wanted something to establish a culture. Something to make everyone feel a part of a whole. Luke Walton wanted 300 passes a game. **E**

WARRIORS, THEY GET THE JOB DONE

What's the closest thing to democracy in the NBA? Golden State's offense. So it's only natural that *Hamilton*'s original Thomas Jefferson, Oakland native Daveed Diggs, wrote and annotated this musical tribute to his Dubs.



Nestled in an enclave in Cali
Where demonstrations and rallies
Have a long history of making waves and tastes
Shaping language and style substantially
Standing for the best in the wake of the worst tides
We've seen in a long time
From a long line of lyricists, linguists and yes, Panthers
Not to mention regular people so inundated with game
That the slang rivaling Shakespeare seems common
As it should.
Here where Gertrude Stein claimed was no there
Has grown a scene which has newcomers clamoring to understand
And get a piece.
And they holler at fever pitch.
And confidently riding the crest of this epic soundwave is a team that in true Bay fashion redefined the rules of the game.
And then made the new ruler undeniable.
And as a new season begins, we prepare to bring it back
Bring it back
Back to the Bay
Finna bring another one back to the Bay
Show the whole game how to act in the Bay
Squad stacked in the Bay

"In California, you need a strong foundation because the earth is shaking all the time. The foundation of this team is quiet work, making the shots when you need him to make the shots."

"We're seeing this all over sports right now, you know, in football with take a knee. There's a feeling of hopelessness in this country right now for a lot of us."

"The hues you dream in are things that nobody else can know. People don't understand what to do with him. But that's our weapon."

"That's what we call Oracle Arena, because it gets dummy loud."

"These guys are playing in a way that wasn't the way that basketball had been played—and now it is. Everyone's going to have to catch up."



Daveed Diggs, Tony Award-winning star of *Hamilton*, will next appear on TV in *Snowpiercer* and on film in *Wonder*.

TO WATCH DAVEED DIGGS PERFORM HIS SONG FOR THE WARRIORS, GO TO THE ESPN APP

You can hate but you can't ignore the facts in the Bay look

The earth we stand on is Klay

And the turf we claim is carefully placed on a strong foundation
A nation watch us paving the way
In amazement and the sweat breaks out with a smile and a head shake
You can taste the spice Chef Curry cooking up
Look at em shook cause they know that they ankles may break

And they can rant all day

Bout Durant coming over to play

But real talk: who wouldn't wanna live in the Bay?

The best place in the Golden State

Face the music

Hyphy

But never lost the blues or the pulpit

The gospel of Matt Barnes—yeah we still believe

And stand tall

Stay centered that JaVale McGee

But the key thing

No matter what they eyes seen

They can't see us

We dream in Draymond Green

Cooler than Pachulia stare we gets busy

But stay calm and drop bombs like Iggy

You way too jiggy

We way too focused you know this

From the O to the Sco to the Valley Jo to

San Jo this

Isn't metaphorical around here the crowd in

the town gets this

Call it **Roaracle** how loud is this town bizness

Loud enough to shut em down

Loud enough you feel it every time we come around

Loud enough to shake the ground and still

keep em flocking to Oakland

Keep talkin while we win another trophy

Bout to bring it

Back to the Bay



HOUSTON ROCKETS



NBA PREVIEW

BETTER CALL PAUL

At the end of last season, Chris Paul and James Harden had the same revelation. They could not beat the Warriors alone. Now that the two have united in Houston, the question remains: Can they beat them together?

BY JACKIE MACMULLAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUZMAN





JAMES HARDEN'S PHONE was squawking again.

It had been yowling at him for weeks, ever since his implosion in Game 6 of the Western Conference semifinals, when the most efficient offensive player in the NBA had wilted in the most critical game of his life. Most of the communication he'd received was sympathetic. Text messages like "u OK?" or "stay strong," even "praying for u."

Harden had dodged it all by simply not responding, but it was harder to ignore the criticism that had seemingly obliterated his season. Remember his league-leading 15 win shares? Remember how he was the first player in NBA history with 2,000 points, 900 assists and 600 rebounds? All forgotten, reduced to rubble in the wake of his inexplicable collapse.

In that elimination loss on May 11, a 39-point beatdown at home, Harden appeared so discombobulated that speculation mounted that he'd played concussed after an errant Pau Gasol elbow the game

before. Harden rejected that notion, assumed full responsibility for the debacle—including his 2-for-11 shooting, 6 fouls and 6 turnovers—then retreated to Atlanta for some privacy and reflection. "Sometimes," Harden says, "I want to sit in my little box and be left alone."

Now, on June 25, Harden was dining with friends in LA when his phone lit up. Again. He glanced at his caller ID and excused himself from the table.

"Gotta take this one," he said. When he stepped outside, the name on the screen gleamed back at him: *Chris Paul*.

"I'm in," Paul said.

"What do you mean you're in?" Harden asked. Harden and Paul were friends, and they had traded texts throughout the season. CP3, he knew, was examining his pending free agent options, and Harden was hopeful Houston was on Paul's short list, but he was in the dark about where Paul was leaning.

"I mean I'm in," Paul repeated. "I want to come to Houston. I want to play with you."

Harden ranked fourth in usage last season (34.2 percent) for the NBA team that ranked third in pace.

Rockets general manager Daryl Morey had lusted after Paul for more than a decade. He was part of a Celtics staff back in 2005 that tried to deal its star, Paul Pierce, on draft night for the rights to the rookie point guard. As Houston's GM, Morey tried to trade for Paul in December 2011, when he was dealt from New Orleans to the Clippers. In 2013, the last time CP3's contract was up, Morey presented him with a custom-designed Chris Paul and Little Chris bobblehead. The rendition of the point guard and his son didn't land them a face-to-face free agency meeting, but for some reason, even after Paul re-upped with the Clippers, he held on to that bobblehead.

And Morey held on to the dream.

So it was that in Morey's war room this offseason, Houston's 2017 free agency whiteboard was dominated by his "decision tree": a phalanx of available players, myriad numbers, some arrows, formulas, hypotheticals and one name circled in red marker: Chris Paul.

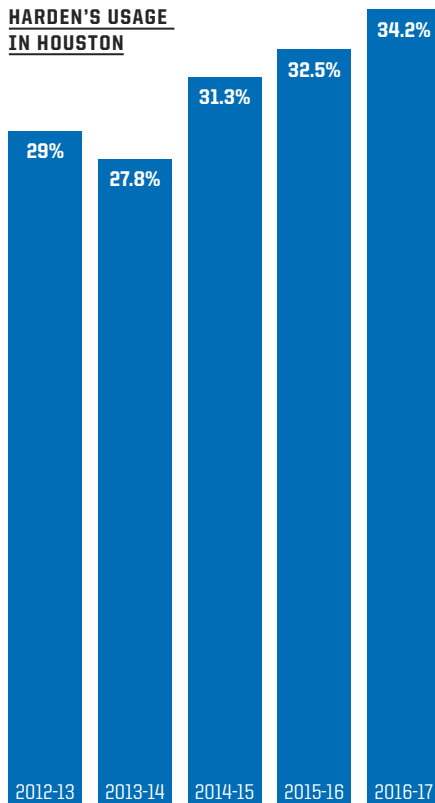


For more on CP3's free agency, watch *Chapter 3*, a three-part docuseries available on the ESPN app on Oct. 20 and airing on ESPN at 8 p.m. ET on Oct. 24.

HELP! THEY NEED SOMEBODY

In his 2007 NBA Finals defeat, LeBron James proved one thing: Even the best player in the game can't do it alone (no offense, Drew Gooden). James Harden—who has carried a progressively heavier load the past four seasons with the Rockets—learned that the hard way. No shame in taking a cue from The King.

HARDEN'S USAGE IN HOUSTON



Harden and Paul project to combine for 33.3 wins above replacement this season, second only to a couple of guys named Steph and KD.

THE END FOR both men was swift and cruel.

As Harden sat at his locker after Game 6, alone, the helplessness reverberated. Player development coach Irving Roland, who had been training Harden as a skills coach for eight years, quietly engaged in their signature handshake, then backed away.

"It was almost like everybody had a fear about talking to him," Roland says. "You could see how much he was hurting. How do you approach him? Will he freak out if you talk to him?"

That didn't stop veteran Rockets forward Trevor Ariza from walking over and slinging his arm around Harden's shoulder: "This was a good experience for you, 100 percent," Ariza said, reminding Harden that every great—Magic, Jordan, LeBron—had terrible moments in his career. "It's a pretty powerful thing when everyone is looking at you, pointing at you and saying all these things about you. How you going to handle it?"

Typically, in the weeks after the end of a season, Roland and Harden would recon-

vene for workouts. This time Harden had taken a trip to Paris and Barcelona to recharge. In his absence, Roland had actually fielded calls inquiring about whether Harden had shaved points or even thrown the game.

It was, Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni says now, "a case of the whole year mounting up. He was doing so much for us. Maybe there were some situations where we could have rested him more. But he was chasing the MVP a little bit, and what Russell [Westbrook] was doing didn't help any, because after he gets another triple-double, James is thinking, *Oh, great, now I gotta really roll.*"

"We talked about it, but there was no answer to it," D'Antoni says. "I wanted him to be MVP. I told him, 'Let's go for it.' But having that and the majority of the offense in his hands was difficult."

The burden, Harden concedes, was too weighty. "It's pretty tough to be depended on to make every single play," he says. "It wears on you when you don't have someone to relieve some of that for you, when you don't have that guy who you can throw the ball to for three or four possessions in a row and say, 'Go make a play.'"

Eleven days earlier, and some 1,500 miles to the west, Chris Paul's final Clippers play-off game was like so many others: disheartening. He had been superb throughout the first-round series with Utah, bearing the workload at a near-historic clip after Blake Griffin had been felled yet again by a medical malady—this time a toe injury. Paul had dropped 29 points and eight assists in a road victory in Game 6 to keep the Clippers afloat; he was averaging 27.3 and 10 for the series. But in Game 7, after being held to 13 points on 6-of-19 shooting, he had departed from Staples Center feeling the burn of an old familiar refrain: "Will he ever win the big one?"

If he did, Paul concluded, it would have to be elsewhere. The scar tissue with the franchise had simply grown too thick.

His turnover against Westbrook in the 2014 playoffs—the one that allowed a game-stealing shot in a pivotal Game 5 loss to OKC—still gnawed at him. He lamented the lack of another playmaker. As for persistent reports of dysfunction in the locker room,

Paul says, “I think the communication could have been a lot better there.”

The disconnect between Paul and Griffin was a known, unspoken reality, yet never one that was overtly disruptive or explosive. “Blake and Chris had their ups and downs, but they already had that when I got there [in 2015],” former Clippers forward Luc Mbah a Moute says. “You couldn’t even tell. They didn’t argue on the court. They didn’t sit apart from each other off the court.”

“Lots of teams have issues, but it was magnified with us because we lost in the first round.”

Says J.J. Redick, who played with Paul for four seasons in Los Angeles: “I tried to wrap my head around why we never won a championship or why, at times, there was friction with our team. I don’t have a good explanation for it. I would say, as Chris did, that at times it felt laborious, burdensome.”

It was time, Paul sensed, for a fresh start—with a team that would embrace his input, not chafe at it. “We just ran our course there,” Paul says. Houston, he determined, would be a better fit.

ON THE NIGHT of June 27, Chris Paul was hanging at 1 Oak in West Hollywood with LeBron James. The club thumped as Paul and LeBron exchanged greetings with Tristan Thompson and Joe Johnson, who dined with his wife at a nearby booth.

When the clock struck 1 a.m. and they began plotting their exit from the private entrance ahead of the paparazzi, Paul noticed a text from his agent, Leon Rose. The trade to Houston had been consummated. Through a series of complex transactions—including the acquisitions of Darrun Hilliard from Detroit and DeAndre Liggins from Dallas, then flipping them to the Clippers as part of a package for Paul—the Rockets had swapped Patrick Beverley, Lou Williams, Sam Dekker, Montrezl Harrell, Kyle Wiltjer and a future first-round pick for their All-Star. Paul was about to alter the power structure of the NBA. He was also about to take aim at the very player sitting next to him.

“LeBron’s my man, but he didn’t know,” Paul says now. “I didn’t tell him initially be-

cause even though we’re so close, we’re also ultracompetitive.”

Twenty minutes later, Paul finally revealed his secret. LeBron’s response? He ordered shots of Don Julio 1942 tequila and clinked glasses with his friend.

“Be happy,” LeBron said.

It was a genuine sentiment yet one easier dispensed by a superstar in the Eastern Conference. Both James and Paul knew, even as the deal went down, that Golden State remained the title favorite. After the trade was announced, Houston’s title odds rose from 30-1 to 15-1. The Warriors remained at 5-11.

Still, Morey wasn’t interested in Vegas’ numbers. He had his own data to suggest that Paul would be a game changer, particularly in taking pressure off Harden. According to ESPN Stats & Information, when Harden’s usage rate increased by 10 percent, his defensive effectiveness declined by 12 percent. Paul, meanwhile, had posted four of the top 100 seasons all time in defensive win shares among guards.

Three hours later, at 4 a.m., when Morey FaceTimed his new guard at Paul’s California home, he discovered his newest acquisition clutching the bobblehead. “See?” Paul smiled, waving it at Morey. “It’s fate.”

To Harden, it looked like a weapon to fight the Warriors. When Morey next called him, at 4:15 a.m., Harden emitted “a little happy noise,” then immediately asked his GM, “Who we getting next?”

Morey, who’d been up all night, shot back, “Can we just pause one second to celebrate the Hall of Famer we just got?”

Indeed, Houston now boasted two singular talents with high basketball IQs, both motivated by unfulfilled goals. Both had also procured reputations as stubborn, ball-dominant and edgy, often difficult leaders.

Paul chose Mastro’s Restaurant in Los Angeles to celebrate his Rockets union with Rockets CEO Tad Brown, D’Antoni and team owner Leslie Alexander. The dinner conversation centered on communication, with Paul expressing a desire to know as much as possible about the team’s blueprint. “It was clear,” Brown says, “Chris was a guy who wanted to be part of the process.”



Over the past five seasons, Harden and Paul have won five playoff series—combined. This season they hope to add four apiece.

As the Rockets brain trust noshed on steak and pasta, Paul called Redick and joked with him about the great tax breaks in Texas.

ON A WARM September morning in Houston, D’Antoni observes his new two-headed point guard monster from the club seats of an otherwise empty Toyota Center. Some of his players, including Paul and Harden, have gathered for their daily scrimmage, and their coach is focused on one thing in particular: Who takes the ball out after a basket?

D’Antoni abhors the notion of having to designate one player for this assignment. Within minutes, it becomes apparent this won’t be necessary. When a 3-point bomb by Ariza drops through, Paul instinctively retrieves the ball and fires it to Harden on the left side of the floor. Next time down, when Ariza scores again, it’s Harden who is nearest to the basket, so he plucks the ball out of the strings and fires it 20 feet upcourt to his new running mate.



The ball zips up the floor as the two point guards feed off each other. There's Paul lofting a lob to Clint Capela for a slam. There's Paul again, as Harden fills the lane on the wing—the ball falling into Harden's hands.

"It's unbelievable," Harden will say later. "I don't have to dribble, dribble, dribble. I can shoot it. Right now. Because I'm wide open. Catch and shoot. I haven't done that in five years."

Roland, who has trained Paul since his days in New Orleans, says he's never seen Paul happier. In addition to Harden, both Ariza and Bobby Brown, who played with CP3 in New Orleans, have been constant companions since his arrival. "A bunch of us went to dinner the other night and talked about the AAU feel this team has," Paul says. "A bunch of guys who love to be in the gym."

"It's gonna work," says Harden, who says he's giddy from the notion of Paul as a finisher on the pick-and-roll, as a midrange shooter, as a 3-point threat. "Chris is starting to understand what I like and what I

2. ROCKETS

LAST SEASON: 55-27

PROJECTED WINS

55.2	57	55.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Houston (18th in DRtg) nabbed six-time steals leader Chris Paul, plus defensive stalwarts Luc Mbah a Moute and PJ Tucker, to balance out a team that was second to the Dubs in both ppg and ORtg and that owns the NBA's third-deepest bench. Behold! The Warriors' biggest threat. —MICHAEL C. WRIGHT

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	115
ROCKETS	113

don't like. Same with me. So later this season, when we're yelling at each other on the court, it's not because I'm mad at him or don't like him, it's because we're having honest communication."

Paul is certain he and Harden will make a great pair "because we can help each other." But the rub is how they defer to each other. Case in point: Harden spent almost all of last season as the primary ball handler in transition for the Rockets. Paul has assumed that role for every team he's been on in his 12-year career. But Harden, quite simply, might be better at it.

According to Houston's analytics staff, Harden led the league with 873 "kick-ahead passes," those advanced 25 feet or more toward the basket. The Rockets scored 477 points directly on such passes, tops in the NBA. By comparison, LeBron was second in the league with 777 kick-ahead passes, John Wall third with 633, and no one else had over 500. Paul ranked 27th with 267.

Harden also scored or assisted on 4,538 points last season, one shy of the NBA record. The presence of Paul will invariably mean fewer field goal attempts and less scoring. Still, Harden insists he won't get hung up on numbers, shots or attention. "None of that," he says. "It's about winning. We've both dealt with the negatives, the frustration, the disappointment. We can't have anything leaking into our goals."

Says Morey: "If Chris has the ball in a key moment and we make the wrong decision, or James has the ball and it goes bad, that's no big deal if it happens once. If it happens a few times, I can see tension developing. So let's see how it goes."

Can they share playmaking duties? Who will run the break? Who takes the last shot? Who is 1? Who is 1A? Can two alpha males coexist with similar skill sets? Those answers, D'Antoni asserts, will make or break his new duo. Paul will need to learn to play faster, D'Antoni says. And Harden will need to remember he's alongside one of today's most gifted pick-and-roll maestros. Both will need to let go of their MVP aspirations.

"It's a matter of getting all the problems out front," D'Antoni says. "Not resolving them, because you can't until they happen, but at least we're discussing them. So when things go south a little bit, you say, 'Hey, remember we talked about this in September?' What you hope they say is, 'Oh, that's right. We're good.'"

"It's really up to James and Chris. When stuff comes up—and it will—are we going to let it derail us, or are we going ahead with the plan?"

Morey continually conferenced Paul and Harden during the preseason on potential trades (including the Carmelo Anthony watch), the sale of the team, roster moves and offensive sets. "We bring our players into the fold in a major way, to a point where some teams would claim we're making a major mistake," Morey says.

Meanwhile, D'Antoni hauled Paul and Harden into his office and laid out the specifics of their workload. Paul will log 32 to 33 minutes and Harden 34 minutes a night. "I will have a Hall of Fame point guard on



"IT'S UNBELIEVABLE. I DON'T HAVE TO DRIBBLE, DRIBBLE, DRIBBLE. I CAN CATCH AND SHOOT. I HAVEN'T DONE THAT IN FIVE YEARS."

HARDEN ON PLAYING WITH CP3

the floor at all times, I promise you that," D'Antoni says.

Paul will come out of the game after five minutes of the first quarter, earlier than at any other point in his career. Harden, who prefers to play the entire first quarter, will now have to take a seat with two and a half or three minutes left. By D'Antoni's estimation, Paul and Harden will play 18 minutes together, including the final five of every game. That requires Harden to sit for the first four minutes of the final quarter.

"I already know there will be times when the game is close and James will be saying, 'This is bulls--t, I gotta be in there,'" D'Antoni says, laughing. "And I'm gonna say, 'I don't know what to tell you. We talked about this.'"

JAMES HARDEN WAS a college sophomore at Arizona State when O.J. Mayo, then a rookie with Memphis, invited him to meet some NBA luminaries who were in Phoenix for the 2009 All-Star weekend. Mayo led him to a ballroom at the Four Seasons hotel where the All-Stars were congregating. Harden stood in the back, wide-eyed, as he took inventory of the room.

There were LeBron James and Dwyane Wade and Chris Paul, all engaged in a spirited round of the card game *Bourré*. The trio cackled and heckled one another as they tossed \$100 bills into the pot. Paul paused midhand to say hello to a startled Harden, who said little as the All-Star made basketball small talk with him.

"I remember watching LeBron and CP3 and D-Wade interacting and thinking, *Wow, so this is how it's supposed to be*," Harden says. "But then you get into the

league and you realize how precious that is."

Today, as Paul leaves a franchise and relationships in his wake, he's hoping, like every new kid in town, that a change of locale might yield new BFFs. Harden, for his part, says he regrets not getting to know Dwight Howard better while the big man was in Houston and vows not to repeat that mistake with Paul. The two have spent the summer bowling, eating, balling and taking in a Kendrick Lamar concert.

Clippers coach Doc Rivers, meanwhile, is watching Paul's immersion into the Rockets with interest. He admits their relationship suffered at the bitter end.

In early September, Rivers is sitting courtside at the TD Garden in Boston, where he returns annually to attend a charity event, and he says the disconnect between Paul and some of his Clippers teammates stemmed from accountability. "I thought when Chris rubbed guys the worst was when he messed up," Rivers says, "because when you mess up, you gotta take it. I didn't really think he did. But overall, he's a damn smart point guard, and you never have a problem coaching that."

Some 1,850 miles away and three weeks later, Paul has just come down from the roof of the Toyota Center. Up there, he has just posed for photos alongside Harden, and he's buoyant—until the topic turns to the Clippers. His smile fades, his brow furrows and he rubs his temples as Rivers' comments are relayed to him. "Let Doc be Doc ..." he says, trailing off.

"I'm sure I'm a tough leader," Paul finally says. "But if I'm so bad to play with, then how come Luc and J.J. wanted to be here with me?" (Says Redick: "Is Chris tough to

play with? Yes, in the sense that there's an edge to the way he plays, and if you have a different personality, it can grind at you a little bit. I always liked it.")

Back at the Garden in Boston, Rivers says that as far back as the start of last season he felt it was "50-50" whether Paul would leave. Paul, in Houston, vehemently denies this. "I was all-in with the Clippers," he insists.

Rivers says the reason Paul has moved on is that he believes he can go deeper in the playoffs with Houston than if he'd stayed with the Clippers—which Rivers disputes. "Chris earned the right to be a free agent," Rivers says. "But the grass isn't always greener. We tell players that all the time. They'll find out."

Paul, on a bench outside the Toyota Center, considers Rivers' stance, then purses his lips as though he's just sipped a glass of spoiled milk. He tugs at his Rockets uniform and glances to his left, where Harden is sporting the same jersey an arm's length away.

"Doc is exactly right," Paul says, his jaw set firmly. "You can hope the grass is greener, and it may not be.

"But I'm going to walk around the corner and see." **E**

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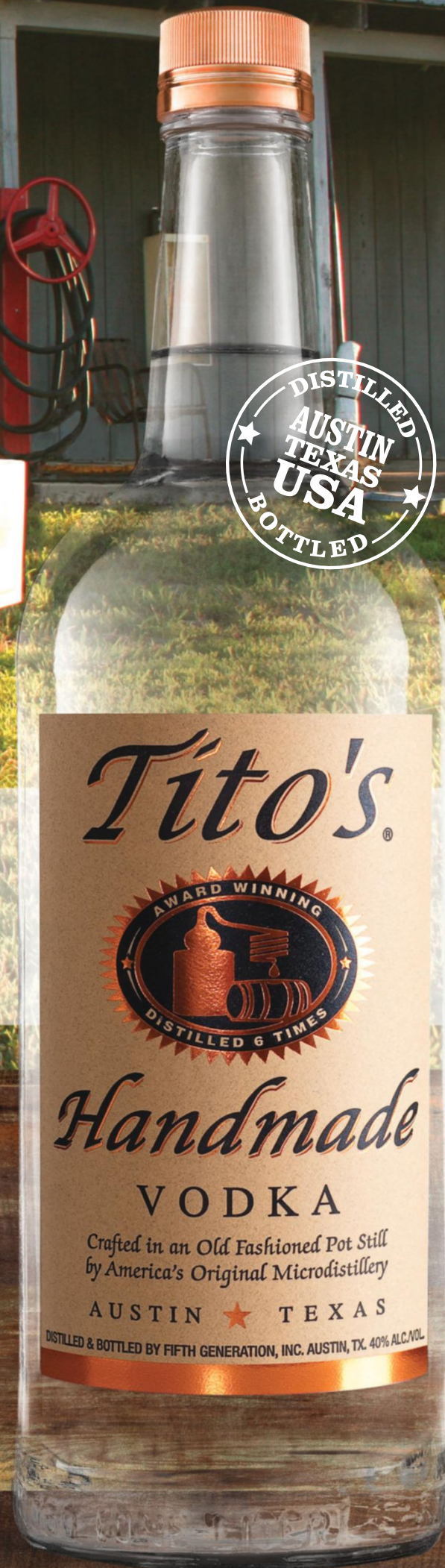
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NO.



CAVALIERS

LAST SEASON: 51-31

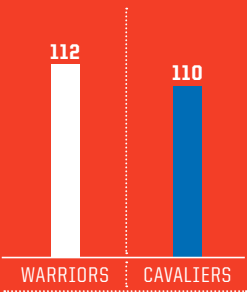
PROJECTED WINS

51.4 REAL PLUS-MINUS	52 SUMMER FORECAST	55.0 LAS VEGAS
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With Kyrie Irving gone, Kevin Love (145 3-pointers in 2016-17) must stretch the floor at center. The Cavs had a stellar 123.2 O-rating in Love's 114 playoff minutes at his now-new position, which is key to Cavs-Warriors IV.

—DAVE McMENAMIN

PROJ. HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE



CRAZY, 9

ABOUT THAT HISTORIC TRADE ...

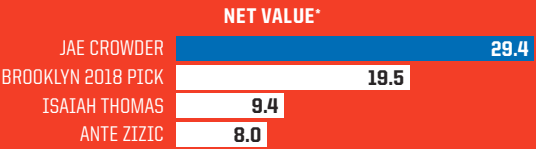
The Kyrie Irving-Isaiah Thomas swap marks the first trade between two teams that squared off in the previous season's conference finals since the Nuggets and SuperSonics did it in 1978. In fact, if you measure the average WARP (how many more wins a player is worth compared to a typical replacement-level player) of the active players involved, this was one of the biggest trades since the NBA-ABA merger in 1976.

HIGHEST WARP PER PLAYER

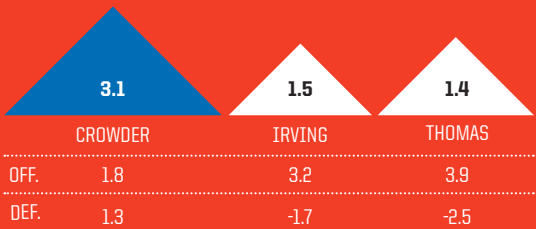


JAE CROWDER MIGHT BE THE DIFFERENCE

Crowder, a perfect fit on the Cavaliers as a 3-and-D contributor making just \$22M over the next three seasons, is far more than just a throw-in. In terms of net value, he's the best asset Cleveland received in the deal, coming in ahead of the 2018 Nets first-round pick that Cleveland acquired from Boston. Not to mention Crowder has a higher projected RPM than Irving and Thomas.



2017-18 RPM** PROJECTIONS



WHO YA GOT, KYRIE OR ISAIAH?

Why did Boston decide to swap All-Star point guards? Three reasons. Age: They're both in their seventh seasons, but Irving is just entering his prime. Money: Thomas said Boston had "better bring the Brink's truck out" to re-sign him next summer, while Irving is locked in for a sensible \$20.1M in 2018-19. And health: The Cavs don't expect Thomas to return until January from last season's hip injury.

KYRIE IRVING		ISAIAH THOMAS
25	AGE	28
25.2	PPG 2016-17	28.9
5.8	APG 2016-17	5.9
10.5	WARP 2016-17	15.4
2	SEASONS ON CONTRACT	1

The two centerpieces of the trade that shook the East.



STUPID, BRILLIANT

In a summer when seven 2017 All-Stars changed teams, the maneuvering between the Celtics and Cavaliers stood apart. So who won this arms race? Glad you asked ...

BY KEVIN PELTON

TWILIGHT SAGAS: AGING D-WADE AND D-ROSE MIGHT NOT MATTER

Before adding Irving, Boston signed All-Star Gordon Hayward and acquired Marcus Morris from Detroit for Avery Bradley. Meanwhile, Cleveland signed Derrick Rose for the veterans minimum and added Dwyane Wade. But neither Rose (who peaked at a 4.6 RPM during his MVP season) nor Wade (peak RPM of 9.6 in 2005-06 and 2009-10) projects anywhere near his prime for 2017-18.

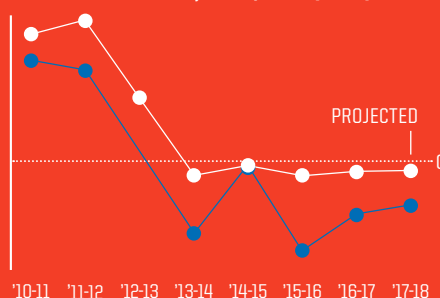


DWYANE WADE ●



DERRICK ROSE ●

RPM HISTORY, WADE/ROSE (CAVS)



GORDON HAYWARD ●



MARCUS MORRIS ●

RPM HISTORY, HAYWARD/MORRIS (CELTS)



SO WHO WON THE OFFSEASON?

Despite the additions of Irving and Hayward, RPM projections peg the Celtics for only an expected 44 wins—nine fewer than last season. The Cavaliers are projected for 51 to 52 wins, but that's under the assumption that Thomas plays about half the season. Even if he's unable to return, though, the Cavs drop only to about 50 wins. On paper, and barring injuries, the edge goes to Cleveland.

CELTICS RPM PROJECTION

44.0

53 WINS LAST SEASON

CAVALIERS RPM PROJECTIONS

WITH THOMAS

WITHOUT THOMAS

51.4

49.7

51 WINS LAST SEASON

SO WHO WON THE TRADE?

The Celtics are betting Irving is a better long-term investment than Thomas, who would have commanded a lucrative contract next summer. And they are probably right. Still, the Cavaliers get the better end of this deal by improving their depth this season in obtaining an All-Star guard—assuming Thomas returns close to last season's performance—and a high-level role player in Crowder. Cleveland also prepares for LeBron James' possible departure next offseason by adding a promising young center in Ante Zizic plus a likely lottery pick.

*All net values in millions and represent the value of the player's production, minus his salary, during his current contract.

**Real plus-minus

4. SPURS

LAST SEASON: 61-21

PROJECTED WINS

52.1
REAL
PLUS-MINUS

54
SUMMER
FORECAST

55.0
LAS
VEGAS

Remember the Western Conference finals when the Spurs led Game 1 by 23, Kawhi Leonard left with a sprained ankle and the Warriors then swept the series? Hope remains. Leonard projects as the RPM leader, and Rudy Gay now leads the league's top bench as a stopper who can guard multiple spots. —MICHAEL C. WRIGHT

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	108
SPURS	108

NO.



LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

HANG TIME | WITH SAM ALIPOUR

BLAKE GRIFFIN IS A STAND-UP GUY

On a paddleboard in the Pacific, the Clippers All-Star talks about skinny jeans, punching sharks, coming back from injury and balling without CP3.





To watch Blake Griffin paddle into the sunset, go to the ESPN app.

ON A MUGGY evening in Honolulu, site of Clippers training camp, five-time All-Star Blake Griffin shows me his mettle in the Waikiki Beach surf. He rides a wave with his stand-up paddleboard and yells at me to follow suit: “Keep moving those arms! If you go slow, you’ll fall.” I go slow. I fall.

Still, Coach Griffin, 28, says I’m doing fine for a rookie, though he repeatedly credits my “low center of gravity”—because 6-foot-10 forwards are jerks. I credit Griffin’s patient but stern tutelage, leadership that will be tested this season as the Clippers seek to integrate a whopping nine new players while adjusting to the absence of Chris Paul, whose six-year term as Griffin’s co-mayor of Lob City ended in June with his trade to the Rockets. We chat as the Pacific swallows the golden sun.

ESPN: I hate you for dragging me to Hawaii.

GRIFFIN: I’m really sorry. I figure we’re here, so why not go out on the ocean, and probably the best way to enjoy it is paddleboarding.

You’re paddleboarding. I’m just kind of floating.

My first time, I fell in, like, five times. I don’t know if it was because I’m so tall or I just got bad balance, but it wasn’t easy for me. I told you, you have a lower center of gravity, so it’s easier.

Stop calling me short, bro.

[Laughs] What I love most is being in the middle of nowhere in your own thoughts, like meditating. I’ve also done paddleboard yoga—you go into the marina in LA, toss an anchor and do yoga poses on the water. I just like to be alone sometimes and think.

Cool, but what’s our position on sharks?

Uh, I’m not a huge fan of sharks. If we see one, we’ll be in the same boat. Or the same board.

Correction: You’ll punch the shark as I paddle to safety.

Yes. Possibly.

Who’s the least likely Clipper to be out here with you?

We did a kayak race the other day. Lou Williams had socks on in the boat. I don’t think he’s a big water guy.

Ditto. So let’s just sit here and talk Clippers.

Congrats on your new \$173 million deal.

I would’ve bought you a gift, but you’re rich.

Appreciate it. Yeah, I was happy. This is where I started my career. They’d just won 19 games, and there was the Clippers Curse—like, all their first-round picks were busts. We broke through that one, then it’s like, “They’ll never make the playoffs.” Now it’s, “They’ll never get past the second round.” So it’s just the next curse challenge.

How did you find out CP was out?

He called me the morning he got traded and told me how it went down, and we just wished each other good luck and moved on. It was nice to have that conversation. A lot of times you hear about guys who didn’t.

Do you feel it was time for a change?

I don’t know. You never want to blow up something like that—you have All-Stars in CP and DJ [DeAndre Jordan], great pieces like J.J. Redick, Jamal Crawford. But at the same time, we haven’t had success, so a shake-up doesn’t hurt.

With nine new players, do you guys have to wear name tags here in Hawaii?

[Laughs] We actually worked on that early in the offseason by going around the room saying names. *Milos Teodosic*. I had to practice that one, but I finally got it down.

For the first time in your career, you’re the Clippers’ unquestioned leader. You ready?

I’ve fully embraced that. This is my ninth year now; it’s time to take on that role.

Chris was known as the in-your-face leader, a bad cop to your good one, perhaps. Based

on your paddleboard coaching, I can’t see you as bad cop.

[Laughs] Yeah, I led by example, but I’ll be more outspoken this year. Over the years I’ve learned that leaders aren’t always popular. You have to say things people don’t necessarily want to hear.

Imagine I’m among the talent-rich 2018 free agent class. What’s your pitch to me?

We have the richest owner in sports. We’re in one of the biggest markets in the world with a coach who’s won a championship.

We have myself and DeAndre. And our work this year will be a big part of the pitch.

What did you learn from the DeAndre

Hostage Crisis that you can use next year?

That whole thing taught us to do your work early. Sometimes guys just want to know you want them. And our biggest thing with free agency will be [re-signing] DeAndre. Everybody else is secondary.

You’ve earned the dreaded “injury-prone” label. How does it feel to have that stick?

It happens. You can’t hang your head and feel sorry for yourself. But my toe in the playoffs last season definitely hurt. It was hard to grasp that. When they said, “It’s your big toe,” I was like, “I don’t really need my big toe. Can I still go?” *[Laughs]* I remember the doctor saying, “Well, no. We should get an MRI.” When I found out I had a tear in my foot—it’s disbelief. Shock. You have to put it behind you and move on.

What remaining life goals have you set for yourself?

Winning a championship. I want to be a Hall of Famer, have an impact on my franchise, and you can do all of that by winning a championship. After that, I’ll probably want to enjoy, like, having a Christmas off with my family. And you’re always invited any time I come to Hawaii.

I’m down. But will you still be wearing preposterously skinny jeans, as covered in the GQ article: “Blake Griffin, Who Is Very Big, Wears Jeans That Are Not”?

What can I say, it’s hard to find jeans that fit. My waist is, like, a 36, but 36s don’t fit my legs. So I’ll get 38s, and they still don’t fit. And 40s fall right off my waist. I aspire to find that happy medium. There’s another goal for you. 

5. CLIPPERS

LAST SEASON: 51-31

PROJECTED WINS

49.1	45	44.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Point guard dRPM leader Chris Paul is out, Patrick Beverley (No. 2) is in. And Serb import Milos Teodosic projects to 5.1 apg (5.0 of them to be found in the DeAndre Jordan and Blake Griffin highlight reels). These Clips didn’t rebuild, they might have just retooled. —DHM YOUNGMISUK

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	111
CLIPPERS	107

MILWAUKEE BUCKS

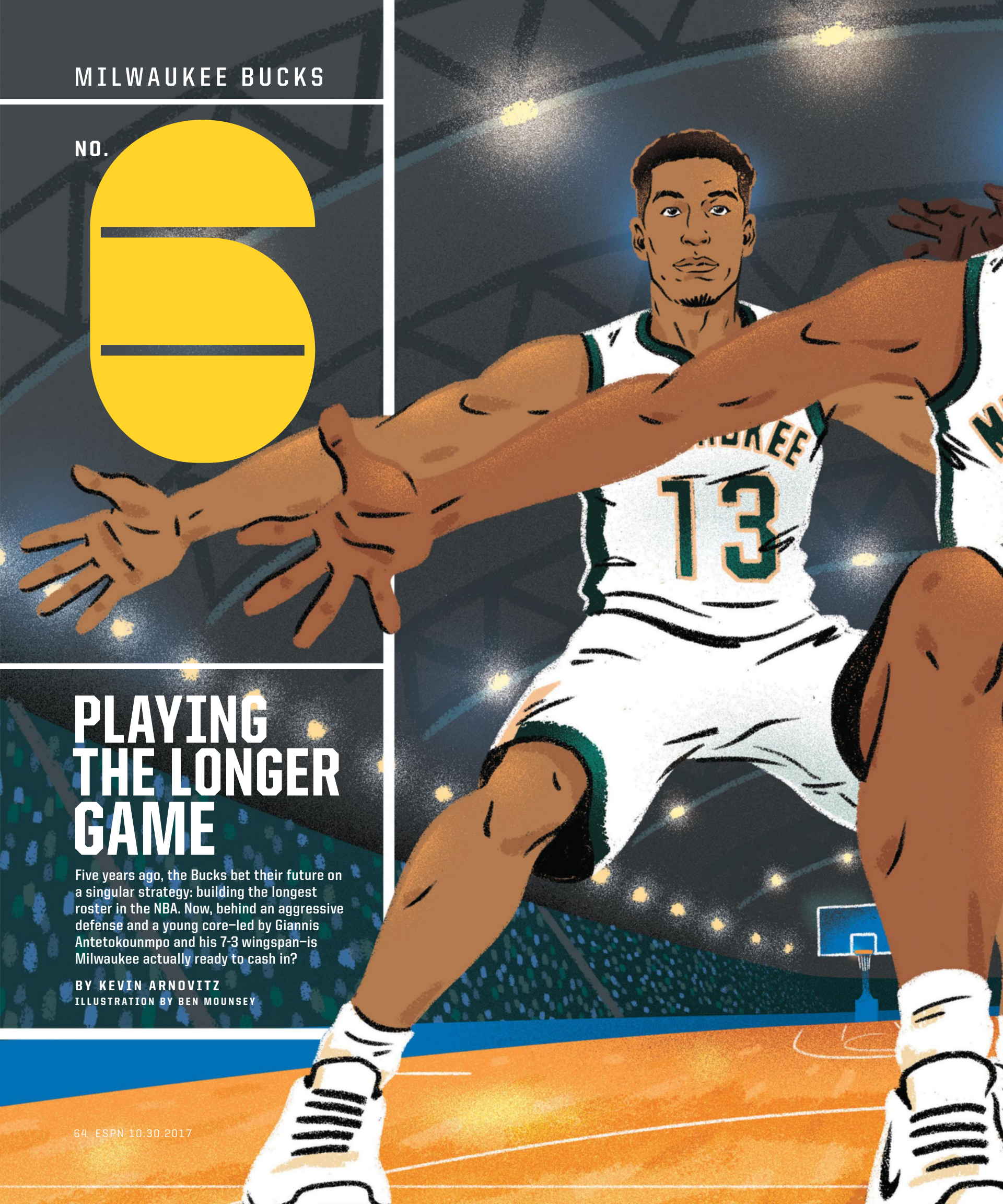
NO.



PLAYING THE LONGER GAME

Five years ago, the Bucks bet their future on a singular strategy: building the longest roster in the NBA. Now, behind an aggressive defense and a young core—led by Giannis Antetokounmpo and his 7-3 wingspan—is Milwaukee actually ready to cash in?

BY KEVIN ARNOVITZ
ILLUSTRATION BY BEN MOUNSEY





IN A CRAMPED Uber ride on a frigid Saturday night this past March in Boston, a parlor game took shape. Sitting alongside an NBA wise man with a depth of front office experience, FiveThirtyEight editor Nate Silver asked, “If you had one chip to place on the NBA championship in 2025, who would you bet on?”

The former executive paused, then began enumerating how to prognosticate eight years into the future. He considered market appeal, naming Los Angeles and Miami for their palm trees. The stability of ownership to bolster franchise health is also important (Miami, San Antonio), he noted, as is the allure of championship mystique (Celtics, Lakers, Bulls).

Yet for all these yardsticks, the one irrefutable reality is that championship teams have transcendent superstars. And if you’re banking on one singular talent to reign over the league in 2025, the exec told Silver, it’s clearly Giannis Antetokounmpo. As long as the league’s most intriguing talent stays with his current team, the smart money on that championship bet lands squarely in one unlikely spot: Milwaukee.

ON A MONDAY night in April 2012, Jon Horst, then the Bucks’ director of basketball operations, filed out of a suite at the Bradley Center with his boss, John Hammond, having just watched his team get trounced by Oklahoma City. The 20-point loss was chippy, with seven technical fouls, a couple of scuffles and the ejection of Larry Sanders. But none of that concerned members of the front office.

What they’d witnessed was a Thunder

team that had bludgeoned the Bucks with its length and athleticism. OKC’s perimeter troop of Russell Westbrook, Thabo Sefolosha and Kevin Durant had smothered Milwaukee’s Lilliputian backcourt of Brandon Jennings and Monta Ellis. (Sefolosha alone nabbed seven steals.) Next to a bouncy Serge Ibaka (five blocks), Drew Gooden looked as if he were stuck in the mud. The Thunder crushed the Bucks on the glass—not because of their muscle but because of their reach.

“They just pounded us,” says Horst, who was elevated to general manager this past spring. “Those guys were just so long, so athletic, and our group, at that time, we didn’t have length. We couldn’t do anything we wanted. We couldn’t go anywhere we wanted. We kind of started from that point forward.”

What they started was something of a franchise makeover. That night, Bucks management peered into the future and imagined a



6. BUCKS

LAST SEASON: 42-40

PROJECTED WINS

47.7	47	46.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Giannis Antetokounmpo (projected No. 7 in WARP) leads a core that also includes Khris Middleton (40.4 3PT%), ROY Malcolm Brogdon, 7-1 Thon Maker and wizened 27-year-old Greg Monroe. Like the Warriors' core, this Big Five is expected to be in the top 100 in WARP. Unlike those Warriors (average age: 29), these are young Bucks (average age: 24). —KEVIN ARNOVITZ

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	110
BUCKS	105

"IF WE DON'T PLAY WITH OUR HANDS UP, COACH KIDD GOES CRAZY."

ANTETOKOUNMPO ON PLAYING D



team that would be all arms, legs and hops. The Bucks might never attract a superstar in free agency, but they vowed to never be outlengthed and outathleticized again.

In the five years since, the Bucks have already fulfilled their plan of assembling the NBA's longest roster. In 2012, they drafted John Henson (7-foot-5 wingspan). The following year they landed Khris Middleton (6-11 wingspan) in a trade of Jennings and drafted Antetokounmpo, the 6-11 forward with the 7-3 wingspan, in the first round. In 2014, Milwaukee chose Jabari Parker (7-foot wingspan) with the No. 2 pick. Until further notice, the Bucks won the 2016 draft, snagging Thon Maker (7-3 wingspan) with the 10th pick and rookie of the year Malcolm Brogdon (a point guard with a 6-11 wingspan) in the second round. They traded Michael Carter-Williams for shooting guard Tony Snell (6-11½ wingspan) just before last season, then took forward D.J. Wilson (7-3 wingspan) in June's draft.

In last season's playoffs, Bucks center Thon Maker (7-foot-1) made the passing lanes treacherous for Toronto's 6-foot Kyle Lowry.

As a team-building strategy in a small market, it's a rather bold way to exploit a market inefficiency: As other teams zig by hoarding shooters, the Bucks committed to zagging by making this physiological attribute a priority. Length can't be circumnavigated and it can't be defended. It buys you time and it covers up mistakes. But it also requires a different kind of long game—one that involves identifying and acquiring the right talent.

When Milwaukee selected Antetokounmpo 15th overall in the 2013 draft, he barely registered on the scouting radar. As an 18-year-old in Greece's second-tier professional league, he averaged less than 10 points and 22 minutes over 26 games. The Bucks, one of the few teams to actually see him play in person, saw the sketch of a new-era superstar who had the frame of a dominant playmaker, even if the body was only in the incubation stage.

Antetokounmpo was 6-8½ and 196 pounds when he arrived in the NBA a few months later, but he immediately established himself as a basketball curio. World-class sports scientists marveled at his biomechanical attributes. With only a basic phrase book's worth of English, he carried himself with a shy boyishness, yet anyone who spent 10 minutes with him could see the nascent outline of what would become the Full Giannis Experience.

Basketball wonks argued about his natural position, but at a certain point, Milwaukee wisely tabled that discussion. Position be damned, the kid could just *play*.

Coach Jason Kidd, who arrived in Milwaukee in 2014, let him do just that. Kidd is demanding, occasionally cantankerous, but he

also tolerates youthful failures. And he saw a fair amount of them from Antetokounmpo. Kidd recalls a practice in 2015 when Antetokounmpo repeatedly failed to execute a defensive drill, then allowed his competitiveness to wilt in frustration. Two days later, in a big game against Cleveland during a playoff push, Kidd DNP'd his young star.

"I needed to have experience with him," Kidd says. "It's going to happen again. Maybe not with him but to someone else. He can grab the teammate and go, 'Hey, look, this is what you should do because this is what happened to me.' At 22, as a leader, you have to have those experiences."

Says Antetokounmpo: "I knew a lot about basketball my rookie season, but I didn't know a lot about the NBA game. The second year, when the coaching staff came, that's when I realized, 'Now the real s--- begins. I have to know the game. I have to understand the game. That changes the way I have to look at the game.'"

Kidd's patience has paid dividends. Now Antetokounmpo has a maturity on the court that matches his physical transformation. He grew 2½ inches during his rookie season, climbing to 6-11, and now weighs 222 pounds, giving him the ability to face the league's interior brutes while also retaining the agility to glide with the slickest perimeter playmakers. He displays a point guard's vision and finesse—second to LeBron James last season in assist rate among starting small forwards—and might be the league's most lethal rebound-and-go threat in the open floor. He can create off the dribble—only a *single* dribble if he's anywhere inside 25 feet.

Last season he made his first NBA All-Star team and was named the league's Most Improved Player. His output—22.9 points on a true shooting percentage of 59.9 percent, 8.8 rebounds and 5.4 assists in 35.6 minutes per game—elevated him to eighth in MVP voting. His long-range shot needs improvement, but if he can nudge last season's meager 27.2 percentage from beyond the arc up into the mid-30s, he will qualify indisputably as the NBA's most complete under-25 player since James.

"After he won Most Improved, he said that next year he's going to win it again," says Maker. "He's basically saying he can't put a ceiling on himself."

IT'S MID-SEPTEMBER, two weeks before players must officially report to training camp, but the young Bucks have been at the facility for weeks. After a couple of hours of drills, including one-on-one battles with Maker and Sterling Brown, Antetokounmpo heads over to the gym for weights and cardio, then heads home to check on his family. This is all part of a juggling act for Antetokounmpo, who balances his devotion to basketball with a caretaker's role for his parents and two younger brothers, who've lived with him since he arrived from Greece four years ago. Kostas, 19, was an all-state basketball player at Dominican High in Milwaukee and is now a redshirt freshman at Dayton. Alex, 15, is now a sophomore at Dominican (and is already rumored to become the biggest basketball talent in the Antetokounmpo family). As Giannis' pro career has exploded, he's one part breadwinner and one part guidance counselor.

"When the season starts, everything ends," Antetokounmpo says. "It's going to be me, my home, my family and basketball."

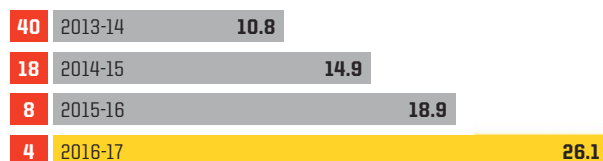
That evening, he'll leave the facility for a couple of hours to check in on Alex and make sure his class load will track him for college eligibility. Then it's back to the gym for what the Bucks call night school.

Kidd imported the routine from Dallas, where players would voluntarily return for a little more work, including individual film

TRENDING UP

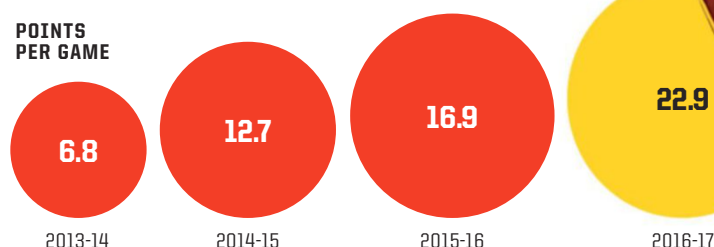
Since Giannis Antetokounmpo entered the league in 2013, his PER has grown even more than his wingspan.

PLAYER EFFICIENCY RATING



SMALL FORWARD RANK

POINTS PER GAME



sessions with the staff. Coming back and putting in reps after practice isn't a novel phenomenon, but the Bucks have formalized it as a staple of their routine.

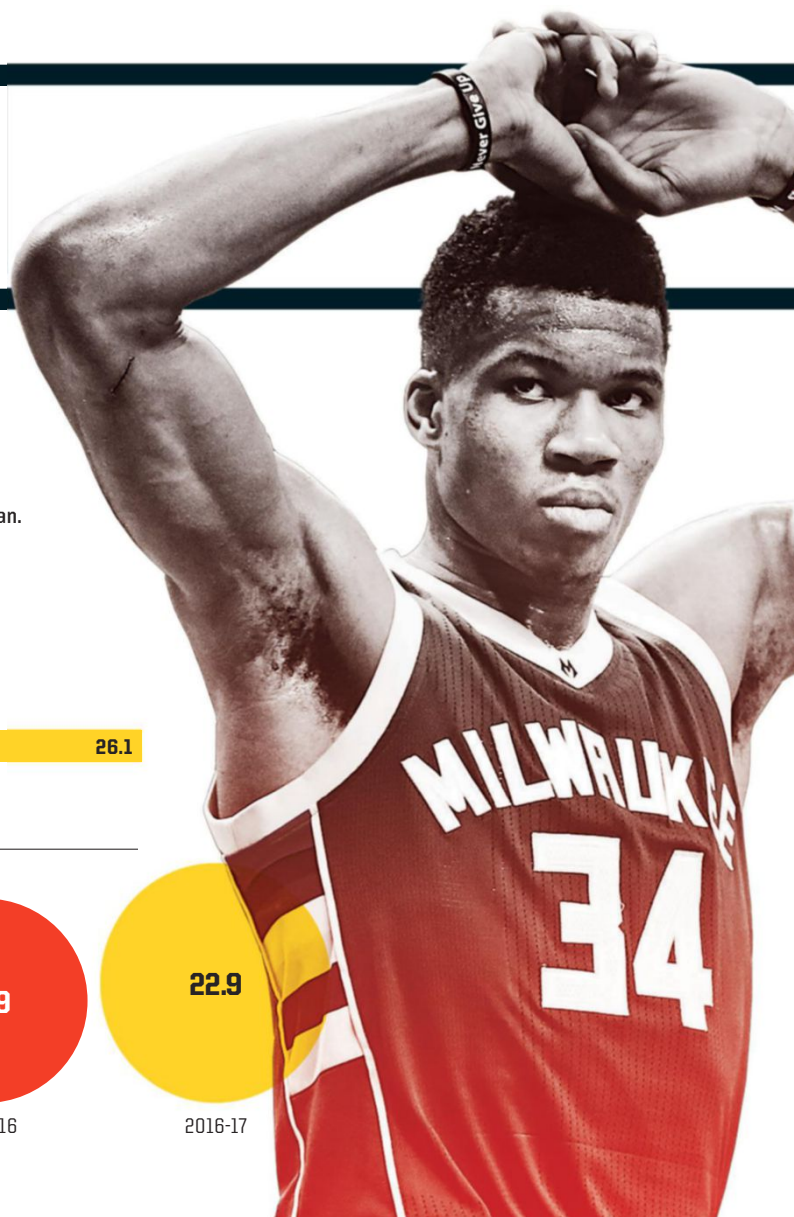
Though there's no hard-and-fast schedule, the session usually starts with some light shooting drills or individual work on the floor. If there are enough guys present, assistant Sean Sweeney might conduct a sneak preview of a walk-through for the following night's game. Then they'll cool off and head inside for some film tutorials.

With a core group so inexperienced, Kidd puts a premium on watching tape.

"Our biggest question for a young guy is, 'Can you read?'" Kidd says. "If they're coming down the floor at you, what are they trying to do? If you can tell me, then we're doing something right. For young players, they don't have enough experience of see-

ing the action. You watch your habits. Night school is a way to educate a player about how to adjust the next time you see a situation. 'Can you read the action?'"

In addition to Giannis, all that night school practice has already produced a star student in Maker; as a center, he hit 37.8 percent of his 74 3-point attempts last season. Parker's natural scoring talent remains promising, though he has torn his ACL twice in the past three seasons and will be sidelined until at least February. Of course, homegrown teams that contend need to develop more than their superstars, and the Bucks look to have developed an impressive core of non-lottery picks. With Brogdon, the only second-rounder to win Rookie of the Year in the lottery era, Milwaukee scored big. While it's unlikely he'll ever be a terrifying threat off the dribble, he's a reliable point



**"HE'S BASICALLY SAYING
HE CAN'T PUT A
CEILING ON HIMSELF."**

THON MAKER ON ANTETOKOUNMPO

guard, a 40 percent shooter from 3 and, in the language of Kidd, a big reader of the court. Middleton, also a second-rounder, is now the team's quiet leader and most refined player. Snell, a castoff from Chicago, provides essential spacing as the Bucks' opening-night starting shooting guard. Perhaps more important, outside of Parker, each of the young starters is contractually committed to the Bucks for at least a couple of seasons. And while the accounting will get hairy as the payroll grows, this roster should breed the kind of continuity into Antetokounmpo's prime that the NBA covets.

WITH AN OPENING-NIGHT starting lineup whose collective wingspans could bridge Lake Michigan, the Bucks may look to have completed their mission, but if their all-in focus on length is going to result in championships, they'll have to prove they can apply it. To do so, the Bucks have crafted an interesting, and aggressive, defense—one that routinely sends two defenders at the opposing ball handler, with pressure ready to pounce behind the blitz. This half-court scheme features a set of strategic imperatives, including a couple that borrow from other sports.

"We call it 'No fastballs,'" Kidd says. "Fastballs kill us. We talk about it all the time. 'No one can throw a fastball. No one can throw a strike.' If someone throws a strike, it puts us in harm's way."

The Bucks define a fastball, or strike, as a pass delivered to an opposing player in the optimal spot at the optimal speed at the optimal moment. More than ever, the league's best offenses subsist on a healthy diet of catch-and-shoot bombs born out of drive-and-kick attacks or quick passes within a

motion offense. A defense that can reroute those passes or delay them can degrade the quality of those shots.

"We actually measure air time," Kidd says. "We need a hang-time pass. We need a pass that is a ball and not a strike. If that's the case, we win."

Kindly excuse the mixed metaphors deep in Packers country, but the Bucks see their half-court defense as one part punt-cover-age team. The greater the Bucks' lanky defenders can divert an opponent's passes high and wide, the less likely that opponent is to get a comfortable look at the basket. This is why the coaching staff hammers home its "hands up" directive and why it has basketball operations staffer Nic Turner chart each possession accordingly.

"If we don't play with our hands up, Coach Kidd goes crazy," says Antetokounmpo. "After a game, there will be stats on the wall of how many times Giannis has his hands down. If we're going to be aggressive on the ball, your hands have to be up. You're constantly trying to recover, so the ball has to stay in the air."

Forcing a sharpshooter to gather a wayward pass buys the Bucks' defense time to rotate back into position. Voluntarily putting a defense—particularly a young one—into rotation is a risky proposition, but length offers a modicum of insurance. It affords defenders like Antetokounmpo the luxury of being a little farther afield from his primary assignment yet still allows the ability to contest.

"Giannis is like a flagpole with his hands up," Sweeney says. "He can be outside of the 3-foot window of a shooter and still challenge a shot."

Take the Bucks' 104-77 domination of

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Toronto in Game 3 of their first-round series last season as the platonic ideal. With Brogdon and Maker rushing Kyle Lowry at the top of the floor, Lowry was reduced to floating desperate passes to any warm body among the thicket of Bucks limbs. Against the Bucks' starters, the Raptors scored 12 points in the first, then only 16 in the third.

There's evidence that the strategy is paying off: The Bucks' defense finished last season 19th overall in efficiency yet ranked 12th after the All-Star break. The high-pressure defense yields considerably more corner-3 attempts than any other squad in the league, though the Bucks defend them at about a league-average percentage. The most auspicious results come from the projected starting lineup of the future—Brogdon, Snell, Middleton, Antetokounmpo, Maker—which yielded only 99.8 points per 100 possessions as a five-man unit. That's better than the Warriors' league-leading defense.

The Bucks' defensive formula seems to be working. Add to that a superstar, a youthful nucleus that digs night school, and a top-notch training program and it all bodes well for Milwaukee's future.

As long as ownership doesn't muck it up.

AS HEALTHY AS the Bucks' DNA appears in the locker room, a few genetic defects have been revealed upstairs.

The palace intrigue ensued soon after the current ownership group of Wes Edens, Marc Lasry and Jamie Dinan purchased the team in April 2014. Though they are each well-regarded by many, the unholy union of über-wealthy hedge fund managers with well-endowed egos has proved itself to be combustible as a partnership.

Since the purchase, Edens has served as the team's governor—and therefore the official final word on all major decisions—but Lasry will take over the role in 2019. That dynamic has proved problematic, particularly after Hammond left the organization for Orlando this summer. At any random moment over the 40 months he worked for the current regime, Hammond was twisting, either on the verge of losing his job or having his contract extended. From the outset, ownership was conflicted about him. It admired Hammond's affable manner and



NUGGETS

LAST SEASON: 40-42

PROJECTED WINS

47.7	46	45.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

After Nikola Jokic became a starter for good in December, Denver had the NBA's top ORtg (113.3). Better than the Dubs! Jokic (projected 17.7/10.0/5.2) stars on offense, but Denver needs D (projected 21st per 100 possessions). With Paul Millsap around, Denver could end a four-year playoff drought. —TIM MACMAHON

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	116
NUGGETS	111



THUNDER

LAST SEASON: 47-35

PROJECTED WINS

50.6	50	53.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Russell Westbrook and his NBA-record 41.7 usage percentage couldn't top GS. So enter Paul George and Carmelo Anthony (projected career-low 26.3 usage percentage). Melo may have to stand in the corner (42.6 percent on 47 attempts from 3 last season) to save the NBA's worst 3-point team. —ROYCE YOUNG

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	116
THUNDER	111

keen eye that plucked one overachieving pick after another in the draft. Yet as a basketball lifer who majored in scouting, Hammond didn't project the image of the new-economy GM, "the guy who works 18 hours a day, speaks the hedge fund language and will cut your nuts off," in the language of one league exec. Eventually, the latter condition outweighed the former in the eyes of ownership.

In 2016, the Bucks hired Justin Zanik away from Utah to become their assistant general manager, with the expectation that he'd eventually succeed Hammond as general manager. But when Hammond left, the Bucks opened up the search, despite Lasry's preference to elevate Zanik as planned.

Edens exercised his veto power, a nuclear option he'd never previously used as governor. With the franchise at an impasse, Horst emerged as a "reluctant compromise," in the words of one Bucks insider. Those who have worked with Horst rave about his work ethic and humility, but the process by which the Bucks named him their lead basketball exec has left observers around the league bemused. Multiple agents and executives expressed concern about the way ownership has managed its in-house relationships during its short tenure.

If the Bucks were to repel Antetokounmpo, it would be an especially cruel outcome. Hammond was a pragmatist who readily conceded that Milwaukee isn't a destination for superstars, but Antetokounmpo loves the city and is indifferent to market size. If his gaze turns elsewhere, it won't be because there isn't anywhere appealing to eat after midnight, or because the wind from the lake numbs his 12-inch hands, or because he can't score good endorsement deals from a small NBA market. It'll be because a bunch of hedge fund guys couldn't agree on a coherent vision.

All that's left is for Bucks management to demonstrate to Antetokounmpo that it has the competence and stability to be entrusted with his Hall of Fame talent—a long-range plan as important as its strategy to build a roster to highlight its star's abilities.

With that road map, the hypothetical posed in the chilly Uber in March takes a tantalizing turn, one long in intrigue. **E**



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NOT MAKING IT.

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Rapper, Actor, Entrepreneur



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MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES

LAST SEASON: 31-51

PROJECTED WINS

50.0	48	48.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Tom Thibodeau landed Jimmy Butler and Taj Gibson to lend some Thibs-level D to the otherwise elite Andrew Wiggins (460th in dRPM) and Karl-Anthony Towns (last among centers). Minnesota should finally return to the playoffs behind an offense projected better than everyone but the Warriors. —NICK FRIEDEL

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	113
TIMBERWOLVES	108

Welcome to the grind house: Expect Tom Thibodeau to exploit the youth of Andrew Wiggins, Karl-Anthony Towns and Jimmy Butler.



THE WOLVES WILL NOT REST

Tom Thibodeau is a man obsessed with the grind. The Timberwolves were one of five teams that didn't register a DNP-Rest last season. Of the top five players in minutes per game, two played for Thibodeau. This summer he landed a third: Jimmy Butler. Are the Wolves ready for the spotlight, or will they burn out before they get there?

BY TOM HABERSTROH

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION
BY JOSUE EVILLA

MINUTE BY MINUTE

Modern NBA players just don't pile up minutes like they used to. In 2005-06, 20 players logged more than 3,000 minutes. That's dwindled in recent years. One exception? Thibodeau's Wolves.

PLAYERS
WITH 3,000
OR MORE
MINUTES



2009-10



2010-11



2011-12



2012-13



2013-14



2014-15



2015-16



2016-17

Andrew Wiggins

3,048

Karl-Anthony Towns

3,030

BENCH, PRESSED

Minnesota's bench logged an NBA-low 5,717 minutes (69.7 per game) last season. That's 500 fewer minutes than the next-lowest team, the Wizards. The Wolves bench also scored an NBA-low 22.8 points per game, just over half that of playoff teams Houston and San Antonio, which both averaged 39.0 points from the pine.

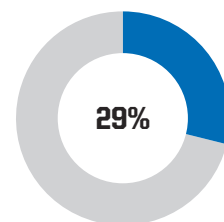
BENCH POINTS PER GAME

HOUSTON	39.0
SAN ANTONIO	39.0
MINNESOTA	22.8

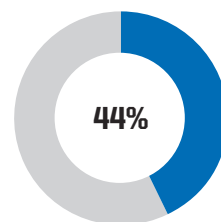
TAKE IT EASY

Running nonstop takes a different toll on big men. Karl-Anthony Towns played all 82 games in each of his first two seasons. The last 7-footer to do that? Brook Lopez, who has missed 160 games since, mostly due to foot problems. Before Lopez, the last 7-footer to debut with 164 straight appearances was the Rockets' Yao Ming, who sat 252 games over his next seven seasons. Thibodeau just happened to be an assistant in Houston for four of Yao's first five seasons.

PERCENTAGE OF GAMES MISSED AFTER TWO SEASONS



Brook Lopez
2010-11 TO 2016-17



Yao Ming
2004-05 TO 2010-11

RUNNING WITH THE PACK

If only games were 24 minutes long. Based on first-half point differential, the Wolves were the sixth-best team in the league. But fatigue kills leads, and the team often fell apart after halftime.

FIRST HALF

+162

SECOND HALF

-253

INCLUDING OT

Reborn



10. HEAT

LAST SEASON: 41-41

PROJECTED WINS

42.8	44	44.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Tough D and deadly 3s led Miami to a 30-11 record in the second half, just two games worse than the Warriors, but they still missed the playoffs. The Heat have faith, spending to retain a roster with no All-Stars (James Johnson at \$60 million! Josh Richardson at \$42 million!). That's a big bet. -BRIAN WINDHORST

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		110
HEAT		104

14. HORNETS

LAST SEASON: 36-46

PROJECTED WINS

43.5	42	43.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Fun fact: The Hornets were plus-210 with Cody Zeller on the floor and minus-194 without him. Now they'll go even bigger with Dwight Howard. Add All-Star Kemba Walker (career-high 39.9 3-point percentage) and rim-crashing Michael Kidd-Gilchrist and Charlotte is hoping Goliath can slay David. -TOM HABERSTROH

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		110
HORNETS		103

From left:
Damian Lillard,
Anthony Davis and
Gordon Hayward

11. RAPTORS

LAST SEASON: 51-31

PROJECTED WINS

43.7	47	47.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Other teams hit the market to catch the Warriors, but Toronto retrenched, re-signing Kyle Lowry and Serge Ibaka. C.J. Miles adds range, but the Raptors still rely heavily on midrange monster DeMar DeRozan (fifth in points, 356th in 3-point-attempt rate), which, ironically, makes them a long shot. -CHRIS FORSBERG

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		110
RAPTORS		105

15. PELICANS

LAST SEASON: 34-48

PROJECTED WINS

43.3	41	39.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Anthony Davis and DeMarcus Cousins anchor the D (projected No. 6), and new PG Rajon Rondo will draw defenders from Jrue Holiday (3-point percentage dipped to 30.1 after the Cousins trade). But to even approach the Dubs, New Orleans (19th from 3, 23rd in projected bench RPM) must play more like them. -MICHAEL C. WRIGHT

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		113
PELICANS		106

18. PISTONS

LAST SEASON: 37-45

PROJECTED WINS

35.3	37	38.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Center Andre Drummond, a career 38.1 percent free throw shooter (52 percentage points lower than Steph Curry), needs more support; Detroit shot 33 percent from 3 (28th). The arrival of Avery Bradley and Luke Kennard will help, but not as much as PG Reggie Jackson upping his 5.2 apg from last season would. -DAVE McMENAMIN

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		112
PISTONS		102

12. WIZARDS

LAST SEASON: 49-33

PROJECTED WINS

47.2	49	49.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

All five starters return from a team that was one win from meeting the Cavs, including John Wall (projected 22.1/10.3) and Otto Porter (projected 41.5 percent from 3). These Wizards are one of just five teams (Warriors, Rockets, Spurs and Bucks) projected to finish in the top 10 in offense and defense. -BRIAN WINDHORST

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		114
WIZARDS		108

16. CELTICS

LAST SEASON: 53-29

PROJECTED WINS

44.0	54	54.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Boston, the only club to return as few as four players after leading a conference in wins,* adds Kyrie Irving (career 27.7 ppg vs. Golden State in the Finals) and Gordon Hayward (24.8 vs. Warriors in '17 playoffs) as long-term upgrades. The wins will come, but the D (projected 16th) makes a Dubs matchup a mismatch. -CHRIS FORSBERG

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		115
CELTICS		107

19. MAVERICKS

LAST SEASON: 33-49

PROJECTED WINS

34.6	33	35.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

The Mavs' priority during Dirk's 20th season? Develop rookie PG Dennis Smith Jr., the future of the franchise, whose per-40-minutes projected stat line is 15/5/6. Yes, Dallas has a Curry (Steph's bro, Seth), but it still scored a league-worst 97.9 ppg and played at the second-slowest pace last season. -TIM MACMAHON

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		109
MAVERICKS		98

13. JAZZ

LAST SEASON: 51-31

PROJECTED WINS

45.1	45	40.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Utah won its first playoff series since 2010, then was promptly swept by Golden State. The departures of Gordon Hayward and George Hill hurt the O (projected No. 22), but DPOY runner-up Rudy Gobert gets help from newly acquired vets Ricky Rubio and Thabo Sefolosha on what looks like the NBA's No. 2 D. -KEVIN PELTON

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		104
JAZZ		98

17. TRAIL BLAZERS

LAST SEASON: 41-41

PROJECTED WINS

43.8	42	43.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

The key? Jusuf Nurkic. Really. His arrival pushed Portland (14-6 with him) to the playoffs, but a broken leg benched him for all but 17 minutes of a first-round sweep by the Warriors. A healthy Nurkic (15.2 ppg/10.4 rpg with Portland) helps give guards Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum at least a fighting chance. -KEVIN PELTON

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		113
TRAIL BLAZERS		105

20. GRIZZLIES

LAST SEASON: 43-39

PROJECTED WINS

34.8	35	38.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Grit 'n' Grind dragged the Warriors to six games in the '15 playoffs, but Zach Randolph and Tony Allen are gone, hurting the D more than Ben McLemore (38 percent from 3) and a healthy Chandler Parsons help the O. Gritty vets Mike Conley and Marc Gasol, top-seven in RPM at their positions, must grind on. -TIM MACMAHON

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS		111
GRIZZLIES		99

*Courtesy Elias Sports Bureau

NO.

21

LOS ANGELES LAKERS

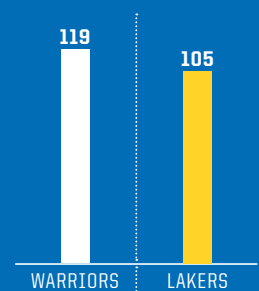
LAST SEASON: 26-56

PROJECTED WINS

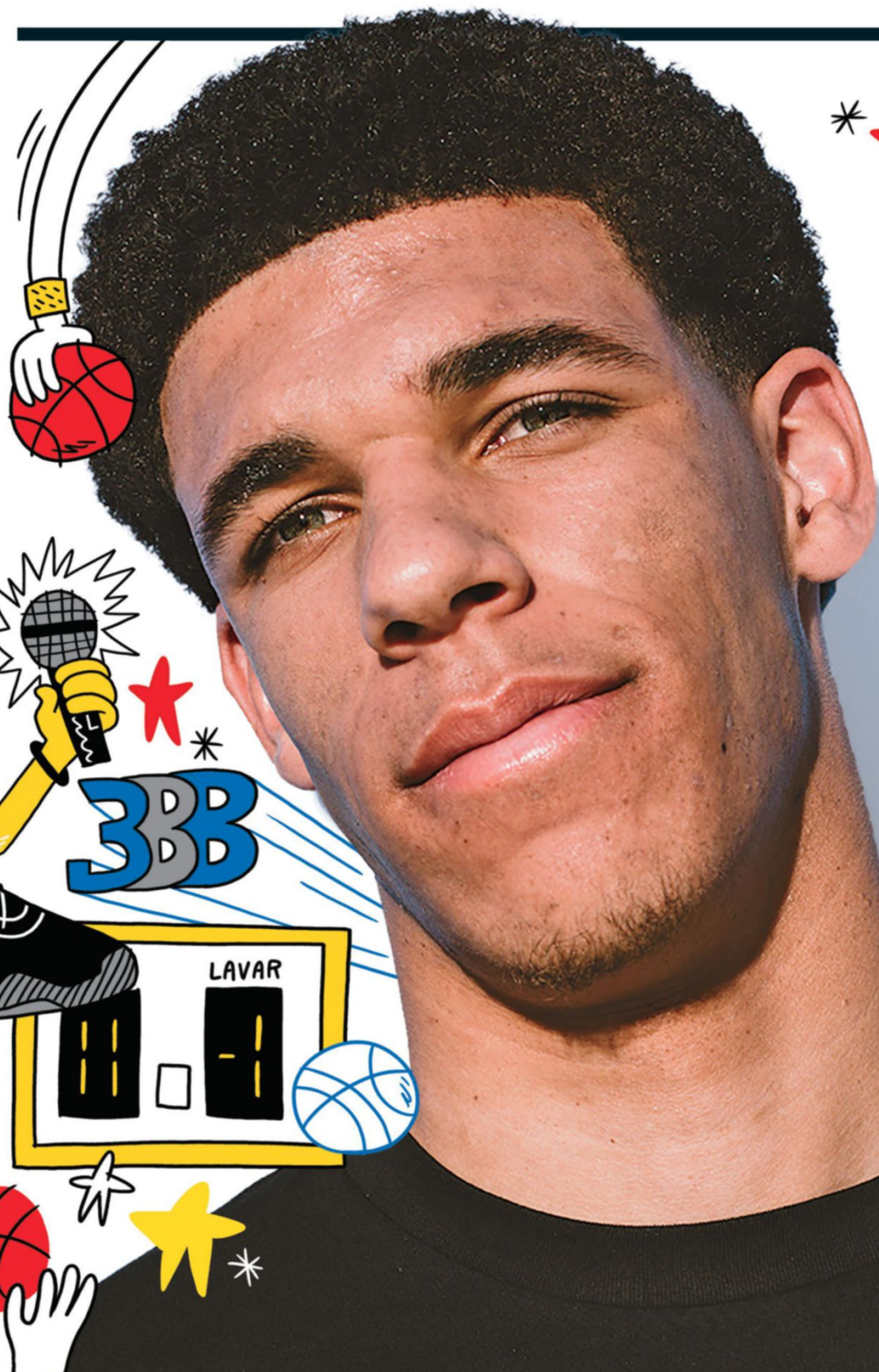
33.1	32	32.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

The Lakers turn to Lonzo Ball and 22-and-under forwards Julius Randle and Brandon Ingram. LA's best hope to gain ground on Golden State? Correct past failings and finally land the big free agent (hey, Magic, ever hear of that guy LeBron?). -OHM YOUNGMISUK

PROJ. HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE



LONZO BALL CON



CONFIDENTIAL

Love him or loathe him, it's Lonzo (and LaVar) time in LA, so we went man-to-man press on 59 NBA pros with six on-the-Ball questions.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREG KLETSEL



What is Lonzo Ball's ceiling?

ALL-STAR **45%**
STARTER **43%**
ROLE PLAYER **10%**
MVP **2%**

If you played LaVar Ball to 11, how many points would he score?

0 **87%**
1-8 **10%**
< 0 **3%**

"He'd have negative points. He'd put one in his own basket."
Eighth-year NBA forward

Is LaVar Ball a master strategist or a buffoon?

MASTER STRATEGIST **79%**
BUFFOON **9%**
BOTH **12%**

"You're asking me questions about LaVar Ball. I think he's making his point."
Eastern Conference rookie

Big Baller Brand: Joke or legit?

JOKE **18%**
LEGIT **82%**

"I love it. It's an opportunity to do something outstanding."
Second-year NBA player

Does Lonzo Ball need to change his jumper to be successful in the NBA?

YES **12%**
NO **88%**

"No way he gets that shot off with Kawhi Leonard in his face."
Eastern Conference guard

Who will win Rookie of the Year?

DENNIS SMITH JR. **39%**
BEN SIMMONS **15%**
MALIK MONK **9%**
LONZO BALL **7%**
JOSH JACKSON **7%**
JAYSON TATUM **7%**

Not all players answered every question.

22. 76ERS

LAST SEASON: 28-54

PROJECTED WINS

33.2	37	39.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Top-three picks Ben Simmons, Markelle Fultz and Joel Embiid are legit, but Philly can't beat Golden State if it can't shoot (no better than 24th from 3 since 2013-14). Fear not, Hinkie truthers, there'll be progress for the Process as J.J. Redick (career 41.5 percent from 3) helps open the floor. -IAN BEGLEY

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	117
76ERS	103

23. PACERS

LAST SEASON: 42-40

PROJECTED WINS

32.1	31	31.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Paul George is chasing the Dubs, so the future belongs to third-year C Myles Turner (the fifth player with at least 14 ppg, 7 rpg and 2 bpg at 20). Still, Indy won't compete until Domantas Sabonis (just 51 3s as a rook) and Victor Oladipo (30th SG in oRPM) make star turns. -DAVE McMENAMIN

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	114
PACERS	101

24. MAGIC

LAST SEASON: 29-53

PROJECTED WINS

32.5	30	33.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Orlando's latest post-Dwight Howard recovery plan seems to hinge on rookie Jonathan Isaac, who at 6-10 fits the Golden State mold as a modern big: long, mobile, able to play multiple spots. That he can't shoot (projected 30.5 percent from 3)? No problem! As a rookie, Kevin Durant hit only 28.8 from 3. -NICK FRIEDEL

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	117
MAGIC	102

NBA PREVIEW

25. BULLS

LAST SEASON: 41-41

PROJECTED WINS

30.1	26	22.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

The rebuilding Bulls traded Jimmy Butler (projected 16.3 RPM WAR) and bought out Dwyane Wade. Sure, they have Bobby Portis, Denzel Valentine and Kris Dunn, but they're expected to add 2.3 RPM WAR combined—0.5 better than the Warriors' third man off the bench. Draft lottery, here comes Chicago! —NICK FRIEDEL

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	115
BULLS	99

26. KNICKS

LAST SEASON: 31-51

PROJECTED WINS

30.0	31	28.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

New York (no Melo and Phil!) belongs to 22-year-old Kristaps Porzingis (projected 19.7 ppg). A young group of Tim Hardaway Jr., Frank Ntilikina and Willy Hernangomez (70 percent of shots inside 5 feet) will serve as a counterweight to Porzingis' outside game. Best case still? Waiting on a post-Warriors world. —IAN BEGLEY

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	117
KNICKS	102

27. KINGS

LAST SEASON: 32-50

PROJECTED WINS

27.8	29	27.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

With malcontent DeMarcus Cousins out, the Kings bring in vets Vince Carter and George Hill to a team that'll bank on young guards Buddy Hield and De'Aaron Fox. The Kings (projected bottom-six on both ends) should still end up 30-plus games behind the Dubs, but hey, at least losing will be less stressful. —CHRIS HAYNES

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	114
KINGS	98

28

Newly acquired
Nets guard
D'Angelo Russell

NETS

LAST SEASON: 20-62

PROJECTED WINS

29.8	26	28.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

Finally emerging from the Pierce-Garnett deal darkness, the Nets smartly traded for D'Angelo Russell (19.6 points per 36) and Allen Crabbe (44 percent from 3) and could retain \$30 million-plus in '19 cap space. After the '18 draft, they have all their own picks. That's at least a step in the Warriors' direction. —IAN BEGLEY

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	122
NETS	105



29. SUNS

LAST SEASON: 24-58

PROJECTED WINS

29.5	28	29.0
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

The Suns, who last made the playoffs in 2010, feature Devin Booker (projected 21.8 ppg), TJ Warren (13.4) and No. 4 pick Josh Jackson (11.1) but still project to be 21st on O and last on D. They're a few years away from being a few years away. So when the Suns are set, the Warriors will be out of the way. —ROYCE YOUNG

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	123
SUNS	106

30. HAWKS

LAST SEASON: 43-39

PROJECTED WINS

27.2	27	25.5
REAL	SUMMER	LAS
PLUS-MINUS	FORECAST	VEGAS

How good are the Warriors? The Hawks won 60 in 2014-15 and still decided to start over. Atlanta is all-in on youth, especially John Collins, who averaged 15.4 ppg and 9.2 rpg on 59 percent shooting in summer league. So was deciding to reset the right move? Check back in five years. —TOM HABERSTROH

PROJECTED HEAD-TO-HEAD SCORE

WARRIORS	118
HAWKS	100





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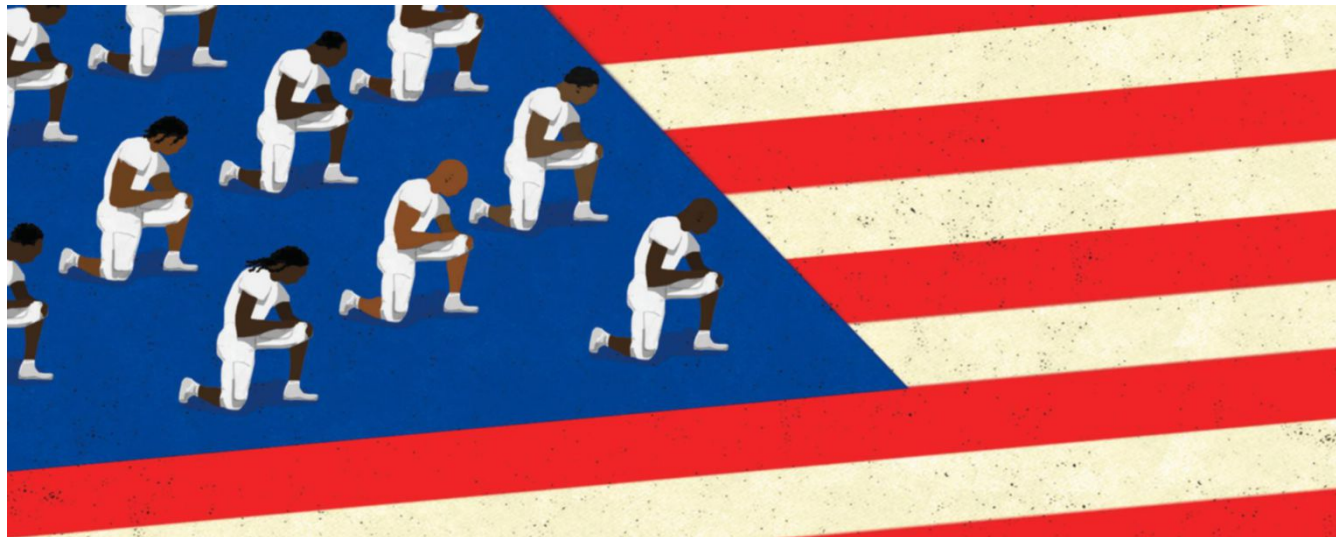
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BY
HOWARD
BRYANT



Terms of Engagement Athletes are protesting injustice, not the anthem—and they need to make that clear before their movement wilts under a false narrative.



he tactical decision of professional athletes to use the American flag as the vehicle to draw attention to police brutality has been an uncomfortable yet unquestioned success. The players have gotten the attention of a public largely unused to political demands from athletes; of owners who now resort to collusion and intimidation to counter the rising power of players and the perceived threat to their business model; and of a president who brands his disregard for the first step in the Bill of Rights with a hashtag, #StandForOurAnthem.

So the world is paying attention, which is the first goal of protest. The second goal, however, is to articulate the injustice to the public, and it is here that the players' captive audience is watching them lose not just badly but Cleveland Browns badly.

The field-position battle of language is where America's most contentious social struggles have been fought. It is the battle between "white nationalism" and "alt-right"; "global warming" and "climate change"; "pro-life" and "anti-choice." For almost 50 years, the famous John Carlos-Tommie Smith raised fist at the 1968 Olympics has been called a "black power salute" when it actually meant "power to the people." When trying to win a sympathetic ear from the public for a political position (or to demonize the opponent), language *is* the battle.

In this most recent struggle, the NFL players have the moral position. The American injustice of law enforcement resorting to using full, often fatal force in too many encounters with black citizens is a scourge worth fighting, but the players have allowed themselves to be positioned as traitors. They've allowed the White House and the owners, such as Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, to pit them against the military, even though it was a Green Beret (Nate Boyer, a former long-snapper for the Seahawks) who suggested kneeling as the most respectful way to protest. They've allowed their movement to be framed as a protest against patriotism; when you're pitted against your own country, no matter how correct you might be, you cannot win. They've allowed the media and the public to define their *injustice protest* as an *anthem protest*, which is both inaccurate (protesting the anthem suggests the anthem is the problem) and fatally toxic.

It is not merely a semantic joust. Who in America has a negative reaction to protesting the anthem? Most everyone. Who has a problem with protesting injustice? Most no one. But without a clear message, the perception that the players are standing against the primary symbol of the country will repel the undecided and make even the more committed

pause. See Oriole Adam Jones and Seahawk Richard Sherman.

Arguing that the flag isn't the target will fail; when the public hears "anthem protest," it shuts down, and Philando Castile, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice are denied justice a second time because the listening stops. Players, from Colin Kaepernick to Bruce Maxwell, are in fact engaged in an *injustice protest*. It doesn't pit them against their country; in fact, dissent confirms them as American. They are in the right, and yet they are losing ground every day.

The players, it must be remembered, are moonlighting—athletes by day, activists by night. Organizing requires years of experience. There is a way to do it—cultivating allies in the military to counter the anti-patriotism narrative; constantly changing protest gestures, beyond kneeling, to make it more difficult to be negatively branded. But most immediately, they must control the words of the fight, lest they allow the terminology to be defined for them. Carlos routinely corrects interviewers who refer to his gesture as a black power salute.

While these athletes learn, the clock ticks. They have been unable to sufficiently reach a public whose reflex is denial of black grievance. They are outflanked by owners no more committed to ending police violence today than three years ago, when Garner died at the hands of the NYPD. They lack the connective tissue necessary to stay on target and remember *why* they kneel. If the players don't recognize that hearts and minds are won by the justness of the cause *and* the language of the message, their movement will surely die, not because they were wrong but because they surrendered the shaping of the dialogue and did not reiterate the purpose of their movement. To use the words Richard Williams would use on his daughters Venus and Serena all those years ago on the tennis courts of Compton, failing to plan is planning to fail.

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